PAPERS LAID

1. Annual Report of the Public Service Commission for the year 2019. [The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)]

2. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Education to the Sixteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA) on an Inquiry into the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago. [Hon. C. Robinson-Regis]

3. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Health to the Fifteenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA) on an Inquiry into the Current Systems and Procedures for Regulating the Operations of Pharmacies and the Practice of Pharmacy in Trinidad and Tobago. [Hon. C. Robinson-Regis]

APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2021) BILL, 2020

[Third Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [October 09, 2020]: That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Ms. Vandana Mohit (Chaguanas East): [Desk thumping] Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for your recognition and let me also take this opportunity to congratulate you on your reelection as the Speaker of this august House. Madam
Speaker, I would like to thank God for his continuous blessings upon me, one of which I am experiencing at this very moment. I also wish to express my profound gratitude to the Leader of the Opposition for her continued faith in me as a representative and let her know that despite the negative remarks by some, she has stood in front of us, to the side of us, and at the back of us guiding us and for her we will do the same. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, to the place and the people who reside in my heart, Chaguanas East. I thank you for your support as a councillor, your mayor and now your faith in me as your parliamentary representative for Chaguanas East. You have definitely shown that no last minute handouts and no rush to fulfil the needs of your community could have grabbed your love and appreciation for hard work. [Desk thumping] You have definitely demonstrated that we are in a new era of politics and governance by allowing youth to be victorious over claimed experienced. [Desk thumping] I say to you, together we shall continue our journey of live, work, grow in our wonderful electoral district of Chaguanas East.

Madam Speaker, whilst I would have preferred my maiden speech to be under normal circumstances, life is no longer normal. Madam Speaker, this 2020 budget is not normal. Billions spent on COVID relief, definitely not normal. The PNM Manifesto of 2015 stated that the aim of the PNM was to reduce poverty and improve social justice. However in 2020, the PNM has increased poverty and lowered social justice, more so in this 2020 budget.

Madam Speaker, I would like to elucidate on some aspects of the 2020 budget as it pertains to the social sector. I would have listened attentively to the Minister of Social Development and Family Services during this debate. To summarize the description of what was presented, I can simply say content full of
mamaguy and no mathematics. [Desk thumping] Painting a picture well put together whilst thousands are sitting out there awaiting their next meal, hiding the poverty that really exists out there in this nation.

Madam Speaker, this Government must remember they scraped their way into governance with just 22. [Desk thumping] They have lost ground. If such is the case you must understand that you are not doing something right, the trouble out here is real, broken promises, it can no longer be your answer. But no, Madam Speaker, one month after winning a general election the citizens of this country have been faced with what is described as a feet in the sky budget, simply not grounded.

The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Madam Speaker, was formerly called the Ministry of the People and Social Development under the People’s Partnership Government. This is because we cared about people. [Desk thumping] Based on the treatment of our social safety one has to wonder if this Government has any care for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, just to look at the tax break which appears to be a noble gesture of the Government. In speaking to the people of Chaguanas East and I refer to Chaguanas East because I am on the ground every day in Chaguanas East, and this which appears to be a noble gesture does not impact on the man on the street whose income is $36,000 annually.

Madam Speaker, how many people would benefit from this tax break? If you look at a savings of $3,000 per year, divide that by 12, that is $200 per month. You now have to buy sanitizing materials; you now have to deal with increased food prices; you now have to deal with purchasing laptops for your children; you now have to deal with paying for transportation as well. Madam Speaker, what
significant help is this to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago? This simply further exasperates the plight of the poor man, the vulnerable and socially displaced of which the group is becoming wider in this country. But, Madam Speaker, these are areas I would leave my colleagues to focus on. My main focus however is on the Government social sector.

Madam Speaker, let us look at the recurrent allocation for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Madam Speaker, you have an allocation in recurrent of $5 billion of which Personnel Expenditure is that of $1.1 billion and Goods and Services, $2.2 billion. Madam Speaker, if you look at this, this is approximately 65 to 70 per cent of the allocation being consumed by overheads and operating expenditure before a $500 grant can be disbursed to the poor man.

Madam Speaker, let me validate my statement with the Estimates of Expenditure, page 386, $1,132,180,000 and page 388, $2,209,700,000 making up 65 to 70 per cent of the recurrent allocation before a $500 grant can reach the poor man. Madam Speaker, from a cursory perusal of the said estimates it summarizes at best a mere 5 to 10 per cent of $5 billion in recurrent allocation reaching the poor and needy. Madam Speaker, what initiatives are contemplated to alter the ratio in a more favourable position by this Government. For example, for every $100, an upward of $90 goes into overhead expenditure whilst a mere $10 goes into actual direct relief. Can this be considered good cost-benefit analysis, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker, mind you the Minister of Finance spoke of a multi-faceted social safety net. Madam Speaker, what social development are we speaking of? What family services are we speaking of in this budget? The Minister of Social Development and Family Services boasted about billions being spent on COVID.

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We are asking when, where and how, Madam Speaker. *[Desk thumping]* If such is tangible enough today we reiterate, allow the forensic audit to take place on the funds spent on COVID-19 relief. Madam Speaker, to get a wheelchair in this country representatives will know you need a friend in the ODPM, yet still, majority of the recurrent allocation is for the operations of the Ministry.

Madam Speaker, as a mayor I delivered 1,100 hampers without any allocated funding. *[Desk thumping]* Madam Speaker, if I was a Minister and had to boast about 1,400 hampers, I would be embarrassed. *[Desk thumping]* Misguiding the population, emergency hampers provided to 1,400 families to make it sound like plenty. The Ministry will give one hamper per family or per household as you may call it. So that is not 1,400 families, it is 1,400 hampers.

Madam Speaker, let us go to temporary and permanent food card stress in this country. The Government boasted on previous occasions about their recertification, which is not even scientific. They boasted it wiped 18,900 persons from the system, reducing recipients from 45,500 to 26,600. Madam Speaker, look at CNC3 today. You have families pleading, help my children to eat, help my families. We have School Feeding Programme in this country. Let us ask, how many students have been left behind? Yet you present in this House and you claim to leave no one behind. How many students in the School Feeding Programme were left behind, Madam Speaker? *[Desk thumping]*

Madam Speaker, we are now in a position in this country where persons are facing asset risk and I repeat, persons are facing asset risk and becoming income poor and we can relate this to the Government because we can see when the Government is becoming income poor what they look to do; put up our assets for sale and it is the same thing happening to our citizens, their assets are becoming at
risk. Madam Speaker, the means test provided by this Ministry has been redefined relating to more income based measures which is putting our citizens under severe pressure. When you have completed an application you have to be back and forth, you have homes without food, you have families who cannot pay transport to reach these offices.

Madam Speaker, you would recall under the People’s Partnership government we were serious about direct impact outreach caravans where we took the services to the community, very frequent. Madam Speaker, you have to ask the question, is this Government making a mockery of poor people in this country? In a time like this let us get into the communities and begin walking the talk with the direct impact outreach. [Desk thumping] The Minister of Finance spoke about pensions and food cards becoming digital. Let us not forget it is under our Government we started the biometric system so that is nothing new.

Madam Speaker, let us go to GAPP, the GAPP programme. The Minister of Social Development and Family Services spoke about $90 million which was spent to provide training for the GAPP programme, where graduates are providing care to 988 elderly citizens, $90 million on training. Madam Speaker, we have to ask the question, how many graduates are these since it is almost every week we as representatives would get calls from families for assistance with the GAPP. We have noticed that both in the recurrent and DP you see these funds transferred to the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service for the Retirees Adolescent Partnership Programme. Is it that the GAPP no longer exists? The population should be informed. At least you have all those young people who graduated, they cannot get a job, “oh gosh”, let us give the young people an opportunity to gain an income. Do not only spend the $90 million in training for
988 citizens. We need to know how many persons are really in this system.

Madam Speaker, I move to the allocation of Development Programme under the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. As per page 165 of the Development Programme an allocation of $13,620,000 for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Notably, Madam Speaker, of these projects are namely a PBX Upgrade and the establishment of an E Pass which represent 53 per cent of the total Development Programme for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, 53 per cent on a PBX Upgrade and the establishment of an E Pass whilst mothers beg for food, whilst the differently-abled out there are begging for help for their—parents of the differently-abled begging for help for their children. Madam Speaker, 53 per cent of the total Development Programme whilst there is no funding catered for Outfitting of Buildings for National Family Services and I am referring now to pages 164 to 165. No funding for Outfitting of Buildings for National Family Services and as usual nothing for the Opposition controlled areas, the Couva Interdisciplinary facility.

Madam Speaker, if you look at the Government’s manifesto prior to them sitting on the governing side of this Chamber it states, provide safe houses, it says: “The PNM will:”—do. And this is one of what they said they will do:

“Provide safe houses for women with sons over 12”

Madam Speaker, how many more “Huggins” and how many more “Kanchans” do we need to know that we need to place focus into these areas? Your manifesto says it but your budget does not say anything. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, homes are overflowing. When you have issues we are sending back the children into the same environment, yet still no funding for these
appropriation (Financial Year 2021)

Bill, 2020 (cont’d)

Ms. Mohit (cont’d)

areas. Madam Speaker, no funding for Data Centre and Storage Area Network. Madam Speaker, do you know that the website for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services does not even state our poverty percentage of Trinidad and Tobago? We are not even aware of how many persons are living below the poverty line in this country. How can you cater for the poor in a budget if you do not even understand how to measure poverty in your own country? Thousands have lost their jobs before, during and after this COVID pandemic.

Madam Speaker, Data and Storage Area; no funding and the PNM Manifesto 2020 states the PNM will do the following:

“…data management system to…identify those households, women, children, and single fathers that require support”

Yet still, no funding. Your manifesto says it, your promises to the people yet still your budget does not say anything about such.

Madam Speaker, Public Buildings, no funding. Let me reiterate, eh, there should be a symbiotic relationship between the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Because it is to be noted that social services delivery is a proposed plank of what this Government boasted about, the local government reform agenda. As it now stands this will be a nightmare because the geographical boundaries between both the municipalities and these Ministry of Social Development and Family Services offices are not in alignment. Members would be aware that under a previous administration it was proposed that all Ministries and Departments operate coterminous with the existing boundaries at municipal corporations. For instance, Madam Speaker, if you look at Chaguanas, the area that the Chaguanas Ministry of Social Development and Family Services office they service, it is not only the
municipality of the Chaguanas Borough. So if local government reform is to be a success as it relates to the social services delivery, then this would need to be adjusted yet still these things are not taken into consideration in allocating your funding.

Madam Speaker, I took a drive down to San Fernando, and of course I am always in Chaguanas, and I looked at the social services buildings, some of these buildings are in the most deplorable condition. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, the Government is saying no funding for public buildings of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Have you looked at these offices, the lines outside of these offices? You have boasted so much of senior citizens in your presentations yet still our senior citizens are lining up in the midst of a pandemic to receive services at these offices, not even a tent. Madam Speaker, if they did not want to spend any money they could have at least purchased some tents for the people to sit outside of these offices. [Desk thumping] Not rent, purchase, because we all know what will happen.

Madam Speaker, I left this one because you know we are in the COVID-19 pandemic and we say that we need to protect our senior citizens. Well, I have been speaking to a lot of senior citizens since this budget was read and you have to now worry about our senior citizens because they are no longer worried about the COVID-19 pandemic. They are now worried about their retirement age. So you have to wonder how this Government, you know, they are treating our senior citizens in this country. Madam Speaker, the Minister proposed a retirement age of 65.

Madam Speaker, I move to NIS. What is the true reason behind the proposed retirement age of 65? What is mind-boggling about this entire scenario of the
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Ms. Mohit (cont’d)

retirement age, I want to refer to a Guardian article headline:

“$18.6b spent on pensions”

Where it was said in this article that the senior citizens of this country are now becoming a burden. Madam Speaker, and this Government claimed to be a caring Government. What is the real motive for this retirement age to be raised to 65? If you were to check, for example, let us say an average work life is from 20 years old and let us check a work time of 45 years, by 26 fortnights, by $106 per year of an average labourer working at a municipal corporation. Madam Speaker, at the age of 65 that worker would have injected $125,000 into the system, five years beyond the retirement age, which would be 65. We have to keep asking what is the Government’s true intent and purpose for the proposed increase of the retirement age from 60 to 65 years. Is it to maintain the existing skill set? Is it that there is no competent potential replacement, namely young persons? Or is it that the NIB is not in a position to meet payment demands? [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, who is the real burden? Senior citizens or is it that this Government is burdening senior citizens?


10.30 a.m.

Madam Speaker, we must note that the loss of jobs, the denial of access to social services, the treatment of citizens in this country place heavy burdens on households at this time. We must note, Madam Speaker, that the loss of jobs, the denial of social services and the heavy placement of burdens on households also all began before COVID. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, we must note that the
economy crashed before COVID. [Desk thumping] We must note that the economy crashed before COVID under this Government. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, as I conclude, I wish to remind the Government that it is the people who put you here and it is the people who can remove you from here. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, the people of this country are in a situation. Madam Speaker, on my way to Parliament this morning I saw an article of a mother pleading for assistance for her child. Madam Speaker, does this Government know what it is like to be disabled? As representatives you go to these people and every time you leave you leave with tears in your eyes, and this is very, very hurtful to see. When you are disabled, you are frustrated in a house, Madam Speaker. Yet still it is very sad to see such an article this morning and all we think is that we speak social development, we speak family services and we are concerned about hand them a disability grant and call it George. Madam Speaker, if we are speaking social development, if we are speaking family services, then cater for it in your budget. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, the people of this country are in a situation where they are struggling to get something to eat, much less to pay bills, and this PBX budgetary allocation, this E Pass budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has shown Trinidad and Tobago that they have a Government who wants more from them than they can give to them.

Madam Speaker, may God continue to bless this House to serve our beloved nation. I thank you very much. [Desk thumping]

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I wish to offer my congratulations to the hon. Member who has just made her maiden contribution I believe and—forgive if I
usurped your function, Madam Speaker. Hon. Member has given a good stride and performance and I am sure that in the years ahead the contributions will no doubt grow and redound to better success.

Madam Speaker, it gives me great honour this morning to deliver my contribution in respect of this budget debate. Permit me to offer my sincere congratulations to the hon. Minister of Finance, to the Minister of Planning and Development, and to the hon. Prime Minister in particular for exercising a balance which is surely one of the hardest ones to have achieved.

This budget comes at a very unique time in Trinidad and Tobago’s circumstances. Certainly it is trite to say that the rest of the world is also in difficult situation. It not easy to achieve a balance when one has to simply find the resources to meet every single need. In this regard, I wish to just simply say things will no doubt improve, and that if we all take our respective parts into consideration and hold the line in the circumstances of difficulty we will no doubt find ourselves moving into success.

I note the contribution of the hon. Member just concluded, indicating that there were allocation cuts into the area of focus that the hon. Member focused upon. The hon. Member, of course, quite correctly indicated that there was a limitation in terms of provision of financing in certain Heads. I would just like to say that this is quite a difficult situation and will no doubt improve. But it is important I welcome the hon. Member to the constituency of San Fernando West because perhaps I can offer a better tour. Had the hon. Member actually been to San Fernando West and to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, the hon. Member would have noticed that in fact we have had tents outside the buildings for a very long time and that there is full accommodation.
[Desk thumping] So perhaps the hon. Member did not get to the right building—

**Mr. Forde:** Tunapuna.

**Hon. F. Al-Rawi:** Yea, and Tunapuna we have these as well [Desk thumping] in right throughout the positions. But I do accept that that is perhaps because the hon. Member has spent the majority time in her own constituency.

I also wish to note that the Minister of Finance has not said that the retirement age is moving to 65. The Minister of Finance, like many other Ministers of Finance and Minister of Planning, on both the present Government’s statement and considerations for the last six years, and in the UNC government that held tenure before, have all had to do exactly as the rest of the world is, it is to look at the contribution parameters where you have declining birth rates and where you have increasing longevity issues. And therefore, that discussion from an actuarial point of view at the NIB is not a new discussion. The hon. Minister of Finance merely flagged the issue. I am confident that in the years ahead the hon. Member will no doubt become accustomed to these matters. It is certainly not an easy matter to grasp at first blush, but I am confident that that would stand for itself.

Permit me therefore, Madam Speaker, to jump quickly to Head No. 23 as set out in the Schedule to the Bill before us today which is the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. As the Minister with responsibility for this Ministry, which is a combined Ministry, Madam Speaker, I have responsibility for 21 areas assigned to me as the Minister with responsibility, together with my colleague the hon. Sen. Renuka Sigramsingh-Sooklal. We also have responsibility for 13 statutory boards and other bodies, and we have an indirect line of coordination with the Police Complaints Authority and the Judiciary. When you take that into context, we therefore have 15 bodies that coordinate with us.
Madam Speaker, we have a total of 1,840 employees at the Ministry of Legal Affairs as combined with the Office of the Attorney General, and in that department we exercise a number of functions. Obviously, the litigation of Trinidad and Tobago via the Solicitor General and the Attorney General’s Office, and the Chief State Solicitor’s Department from an instructing point of view; the commercial and transactional work at the Chief State’s Department and with the Attorney General in my capacity in that regard; and then we also deal with a number of ranging issues including the people of Trinidad and Tobago’s statistics and information and records from birth straight through death and thereafter.

In that regard, Madam Speaker, I am able to tell you this morning that our expenditure set out for this year is a significantly reduced sum when we look at the history of expenditure for combined Ministries. Madam Speaker, this year, our budgeted item is 314-odd million and I would like to point out that that is nearly $200 million less than what the UNC government managed both the Ministry of Legal Affairs and Attorney General’s Office with. Their sum was at $515-odd million. In other words then, we have operated this Ministry and will operate this Ministry as a combined Ministry with nearly 38 per cent less revenue than the predecessor government in 2010—2015 did. Now that, Madam Speaker, really has to drive itself now into what can the people of Trinidad and Tobago say has been purchased as a result of this mechanism.

The fact is, Madam Speaker, year-on-year we spend a total of approximately $144 million on salaries alone. So in the budget of $315 million, approximately $150/$145 million is spent on salaries alone. And in that regard, Madam Speaker, I can tell you that we have managed, notwithstanding a number of difficulties, to grow the Ministry into several areas of success. I would like to point out, Madam

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Speaker, that when we assess the work of the Attorney General’s Office I think it is important to dive strictly to the areas of improvement, those areas which are next on deck and those matters which affect the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So allow me, Madam Speaker, to address the report to the country as to some of the issues prevailing over the last five years and then some of the issues which are next on deck.

Madam Speaker, we have spent a significant amount of time reforming the criminal justice system, passing laws, and also improving aspects of coordination in the registries which we manage. It is a matter of public record that as Attorney General, our office, and our Government, and our Cabinet, we have seen the passage of over 532 laws, rules and regulations in the five-year period that we occupied. That, Madam Speaker, by all circumstances has been a record making for Trinidad and Tobago. We have managed the merger of three Ministries, parts of the Ministry of Justice, Legal Affairs and Attorney General’s Office, and we have shaved billions of dollars off in that combined expenditure rolled up in one Ministry. When we look, Madam Speaker, to our impact of laws I would like to say what is important is what has the law brought for you. Has it been operationalized; does it is affect your functionality any better? And what I can tell you is that we spent a very significant amount of time implementing a formula. That is to change Trinidad and Tobago circumstance by plant and machinery, people, processes, and law. In other words then, it makes little sense to pass a law which stays on the books of Trinidad and Tobago without operationalizing it. For example, we had DNA legislation, we had electronic monitoring, we had data protection, we had sexual offences, we had land laws, we had plea bargaining, we had a sex offenders registry, all passed in or around the year 1999 or the year 2000.

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and many of those laws, if not 99 per cent of them, simply lay without operation.

What I can tell you, Madam Speaker, with respect to the criminal justice system, as major Head we sought to improve the place where justice is done, because you cannot have a result in criminal justice without the functionality of the courts. And, Madam Speaker, the first thing that we did was to in effort look at the elemental parts and bring provisions for amendment. What did we do, Madam Speaker? The first thing we did is to say let us go into a dedicated drive to improve the number of courts. I can tell you that with Tower D, with Princes Town, with Fyzabad, with Siparia, with San Fernando, the courts that are physically with the opening of Tower D about to happen will yield 100 new courtrooms in this country. That does not include the 75,000 square feet in the Magistrates’ Court in San Fernando, or the Family Court in San Fernando at the Cluny Building of the Convent.

Madam Speaker, we went to move the number of judges because you need a judge to handle a trial. We went legislatively in several pieces of law—in fact six pieces of law, we combined those laws to produce the following results: we moved the number of judges legislatively from 36 to 64; we then saw the increase in judicial pensions; we then saw the age of retirement for judges moving from 65 to 70; we then give full magisterial immunity in two stage so that judges have more attractive terms and conditions, can stay on the bench and work longer, can be eased by not having liability for magistrates in particular who handle serious matters. Madam Speaker, we then went into the provision of court technology in a combined effort of financing the Judiciary’s requests; and then the Judiciary through the hard work and dedication and foresight of the hon. Chief Justice bringing forward improvements in court technology.

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Madam Speaker, that saw the introduction of a computerization system in the Magistracy for the first time. That saw e-Probate; that saw e-Filing; that saw the ability for a courtroom to be present via a computer in every lawyer’s office; that saw, Madam Speaker, the launching of a digital audio recording system such that as we stand today there are no transcripts in arrears in the Judiciary. [Desk thumping] We went from thousands to zero in terms of backlog. Now that, Madam Speaker, how does this affect you or me? Madam Speaker, because a trial cannot move in terms of a preliminary enquiry to an indictable matter, from Magistracy or to High Court, or then to Court of Appeal without transcription evidence, we are cutting out four to five years of delay in the transcription of evidence.

Madam Speaker, we created divisions of court. Why? If you divide the court into constituent elements, you move in a faster system. We created the Family and Children Division, we anchored the Criminal Division, we anchored, Madam Speaker, the Civil Division which is to be further amended into the Probate Division and Small Claims Division and Mediation Division. But by doing that we were able to add 1,000 jobs to the Judiciary, and in that 1,000 jobs to the Judiciary, Madam Speaker, we specifically included back 2016 in the Family and Children Division Bill and in 2018 the concept of electronic appearances. We, the Government, amended the law to allow for electronic filing, electronic payment, electronic appearances, and today if you look at the Chief Justice’s speech at the opening of term just had, and if you look at the statistics of the Judiciary, we have had over 15,000 virtual appearances. [Desk thumping] We have saved thousands of man hours on the road. We have allowed for the filing of documents electronically without cost. We have birthed the system of the State having an impressed—move to an electronic impress so that we can file documents.
Madam Speaker, in a three-month period in the COVID pandemic with the opening of 12 courts for virtual hearings at the prisons, we managed to do over 3,500 cases from the prison. What does that mean for the taxpayer? It means that we reduced the bill on prisoner transport which we spend an odd of $25 million a year on, thereby relieving the taxpayer of that expenditure in prison transport and diverting it instead into social services, medicine, care, et cetera.

Madam Speaker, it is important to note that in the creation of the plant and machinery aspect of the Criminal Division, the Waterfront project which is near completion will bring with it a split in divisions between the Criminal Division and the Civil Division. And I can say now in terms of the COVID pandemic we have just completed via the Judiciary the build out of virtual attendance spaces for the marshals of the court to sit with witnesses right at the CID old building on St. Vincent Street so that virtual appearances can be had without breaching the COVID protocols in 10 rooms there allocated and in San Fernando coming ahead so that the DPP can sit in his office working, the Judiciary at their office working, the lawyers at their offices working, and the witnesses under marshal supervision, preserving the integrity of the court system.

Madam Speaker, we went to prosecutorial arm. The DPP has been crying for resources forever. We insisted that the DPP have a separate line item to ring fence expenditure in our tenure. We opened the DPP’s Office in Tobago, we have completed the DPP’s Office in Port of Spain, we are in the course of building out the DPP’s Office in San Fernando, we have provided all laptops and technology requested, we have included a case management system for the DPP, and upon the DPP’s move into the offices in Port of Spain the Cabinet will be invited to consider the filling of the rest of the vacancies as the hon. Prime Minister said to the country
where there is a need to fill certain vacancies the Cabinet will consider them on a case-by-case basis and we intend to bring that to Cabinet’s attention.

But, Madam Speaker, it is important to note that we amended the criminal justice system by allowing for police prosecution. We did not only leave it to the prosecutorial capacity of the DPP who in fact handles only 5 per cent of prosecutions. By treating with that, Madam Speaker, in our Administration of Justice (Indictable Proceedings) amendments and in looking at the improvements of the TTPS, the Government has underwritten the creation of specialist units, a white collar unit, child protection unit, organized crime and intelligence unit, special operations response team, a gender-based violence unit, a legal unit, a sexual offences unit and enhanced coordination mechanism so that the police have the prosecutorial competence and capacity to assist prosecutions. [Desk thumping] That is why the Anti-Gang Act under our management has produced, by way of example, so many charges and matters before the court where there were literally no substantial matters brought before the court in the period 2010—2015.

Madam Speaker, you cannot have prosecutions if you do not have defence attorneys. This Government and this Cabinet brought to life the Public Defenders Division. That is something that this country has flirted with and spoken about for 40 years, and in birthing the Public Defenders Division we have secured the premises, outfitted and occupied by the Public Defenders Division; 51 persons have been hired inside of there. They are up and running, and under the veil of fairness and management no less a person that then Sen. Hasine Shaikh who sat on the UNC Bench twice as a Senator retained the position as the head of the Public Defenders Division. Why? One, the procurement, best candidate for the job, and therefore, this Government demonstrates that it is prepared to walk the walk as
well as talk the talk.

Madam Speaker, we spent time in forensics, the DNA Regulations, the procurement—the Minister of National Security has spoken to those—we spent time in evidence and witnesses. It is surely not lost upon the citizenry that the Evidence (Amdt.) Bill which sat in a special select committee—there was a minority report received from the Government indicating that they would not support certain aspects under the authorship of Sen. Saddam Hosein then. We intend to return that legislation with certain amendments to the Parliament immediately after the budget to bring forward the protection for witnesses, the protection for the criminal justice system, the introduction of computer admissibility for evidence so that we can manage white collar criminality in a more effective function.

Madam Speaker, that is added under evidence and witnesses by the Interception of Communications Act which allow a prison to remain a prison, which allows progress of matters. I note regrettably that we have not received the support of the Opposition in relation to those amendments, and in fact they now threaten litigation to try and set aside that law which is designed to protect the citizens of this country by using evidence under due process admissibility exactly as the rest of Commonwealth and the world uses. We intend to implement that law and we are at the cusp of receiving recommendations as to proclamation from the various stakeholders.

Madam Speaker, we have done a significant amount of work in the prisons that my colleague the Minister of National Security has spoken to, including the addition of personnel, training, the protection for prison officers and law enforcement officers, because you cannot ask your troops to go out and capture
criminals if they are not protected in their homes and if their family members are not without the fear removed from them. They cannot have intimidation of their family members and not have protection and that is why we passed the various pieces of law to give the position. I can tell you now we intend to bring to Parliament, as we finish the consultation, the parole legislation to look at the further management of prisons. That is ready, Madam Speaker, subject to final consultation aspects.

Madam Speaker, may I just ask quickly what time is full time for me?

Madam Speaker: Attorney General, your full time is 11.19.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Much obliged. Let us turn to focus on family and children. Madam Speaker, this Government has seen the creation of a Child Protection Unit at the TTPS, the creation of a dedicated Family Court and more importantly Children Court in Fyzabad and in Port of Spain. Why do we want a Children Court which has peer resolution, drug treatment, anonymize records? Because, Madam Speaker, if you want to get rid of crime in this country early intervention in a targeted way to children is the way you do it. You must take your children out of conflict with the law in a system which is designed for their best interest.

Madam Speaker, we have passed as a Government the Judges’ Rules for Children, 2016; Miscellaneous Provision (Supreme Court of Judicature and Children) Act, 2018; Child Rehabilitation Centre (Designation) Order, Child Rehabilitation Centre (Designation) (No. 2) Order; Child Rehabilitation Centre (Designation) Order, 2018; the Child Rehabilitation Centre Regulations, 2017; the Miscellaneous Provisions (Marriage) Act, 2017; the Children Court Rules, 2018; the Children’s Community Residences (Children’s Homes) Regulations, 2018; the Sexual Offences (Amdt.) Act, 2019; the Domestic Violence (Amdt.) Act, 2020.
What are those in total mean? A dedicated legislative suite to treat with our most precious and vulnerable, our children; a specialist court; a thousand jobs added; special evidence; anonymized records; probation; social services; the ability to pay maintenance and facilities by online payments; the amendments to the Domestic Violence Act under my colleague the hon. Member for Tobago East in conjunction with the Attorney General’s Office. We brought to life amendments to the Domestic Violence Act to allow domestic violence matters to be heard from a police station, to allow mandatory tracking of matters, to protect the most vulnerable.

That, Madam Speaker, the last time there was an amendment to that legislation, if I recall, was in 1999, and therefore, I compliment my hon. colleague, the Minister in the Officer of the Prime Minister, the Member for Tobago East, the hon. Minister of National Security, in working with the TTPS to create the protection and issues for actually assenting to the electronic monitoring provisions to allow for correspondent bracelets for domestic violence offenders so that proximity alerts go off for persons who are most in need of protection.

Madam Speaker, all of this is good enough, but if you cannot make the matters move faster in court then you are tripping into the problems more and more. So we have dedicated our time in the last five years to something called legislative quickening, or judicial quickening. What did we do? We introduced the amendments to the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act; we introduced concept of plea bargaining; we proposed the abolition of preliminary enquiries; we introduced the decriminalization of marijuana; we introduced judge alone trials; we introduced the simplification of magisterial districts. What does that mean? It is commonsensical to observe that the magisterial caseload was standing at
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approximately 146,000 cases per year on average. Of that, 104,000 at highest were motor vehicle and road traffic offences, 8,500 were marijuana related offences, 26,000 were preliminary enquiry matters. As a result of the increase in magisterial protection, the provision of more courts, the simplification of magisterial districts from 14 to three, here is what happened.

We decriminalized marijuana, 8,500 matters therefore fall potentially to come off; we launched the motor vehicle and road traffic UTurn system. That the 104,000 cases; we then are at the cusp of removing preliminary enquiries which is 26,000 cases. It means that 43 magistrates will be left with a drastically reduced court load. But let us get to the evidence of that. The hon. Chief Justice in his statistical information put forward this year demonstrates that before we have even gotten to the backlog of matters, we have seen the motor vehicle and traffic matters drop to 34,000 matters. So you have gone from 104,000 at highest to 34,000, and as we move to the management of the backlog of matters which we did legislatively already—it is just for implementation now—we will be able to eliminate the road traffic matters down to bare numbers.

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Madam Speaker, with the decriminalization of marijuana and with the novel actions taken by the Attorney General’s Office in going to court to free people and to encourage their position and deal with the COVID pandemic risk factors which again we took in a novel way to the court, we have seen hundreds of low-risk prisoners come out of prison already by way of action reducing the caseload, reducing the prison population. Six hundred and ninety-nine people are beneficiaries of bail conditions for dangerous drugs. So whereas you have heard in this country that the numbers in prisons are too high, I can point right now to
nearly a thousand matters of success inside of the measures taken by this Government.

Madam Speaker, when we passed the judge-alone legislation, we were told by the UNC Opposition nobody will use judge-alone matters. The records demonstrate now that judge-alone matters have worked successfully for murder. For murder where we have had an equal ratio of acquittals to convictions and convictions without appeal on judge-only. That is coupled with the moves that we put into place by maximum sentence indications where people can therefore enter into plea discussions and plea arrangements as have been operationalized by this Government. What does that mean for the citizenry? Less caseload, less cost. We demonstrated in our public consultations that it costs anywhere between $15,000 to $25,000 per prisoner, per head, to maintain someone in incarceration over the number of years that they are there, that is billions of dollars. We have by our actions already seen nearly a thousand people between the COVID matters and decriminalization matters find themselves out of that jeopardy and the taxpayers out of that jeopardy.

Madam Speaker, we intend to bring the arbitration legislation to Parliament in this section, but let us shift now to hard crimes. We have brought laws to the Parliament to treat with firearms, sexual offences, bail restrictions, domestic violence, trespass and home invasion, cybercrime, sexual harassment, animal cruelty, anti-terrorism. All of those matters help us in dealing with our State and condition of society. The gaming legislation, which I will come to under a different head, stands as part of that as well with other taking-profit-out-of-crime matters.

But in the firearms legislation, introducing an offence of trafficking in
firearms, making sure people who are guilty of frequent incursions with the law in firearms that they are not put back on to the street without due process, careful strictures. All of these help us to gain a safer society. That is why the Commissioner of Police—and I do not like to do this but let me say it—was able to report to the country that year on year, we are nearly 100 murders less this year. And let me point this out. The only time that that has been a statistical statement of similar measure was when the UNC called a state of emergency in Trinidad and Tobago. So let me put it this way: Under our management, we have managed to see a drop in the number of murders without calling a state of emergency. That means that the system is working.

Look to the Judiciary’s statistics published this year, see the motor vehicle and road traffic matters drop to 34,000, watch the increase in disposition rates and you will understand why the investment in “ah thousand” jobs in the Judiciary, why the creation of 100 more courts, why the divisions of courts, why plea bargaining, why decriminalization, MVRT, have all brought success to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I want to put on notice that we have been trying as a country for eight years to pass the cybercrime law. We have had no assistance from the Opposition. We intend to reformulate that law and bring it back to the Parliament with immediacy. I would like to say that the combination of the anti-terrorism law and the package of laws to deal with taking the profit out of crime are very important for this country. It is a matter of record that we brought the FATCA legislative suite after much toing and froing and opposition, we managed to pass that legislation under threat of international sanction. We amended the Income Tax Act, we brought the Miscellaneous Provision (Mutual Assistance in
Criminal Matters), et cetera, legislation both in 2018. We have also brought forward the package of legislation to treat with a number of areas for the Financial Action Task Force and the record shows that Trinidad and Tobago has successfully graduated out of the Financial Action Task Force grey listing and that, Madam Speaker, is a unique accomplishment which we received international accolade on.

I wish to publicly state right now that I am in communication with the European Commission and the European Union in line with Caricom’s position to say that the European Union, European Commission blacklisting of Trinidad and Tobago is to be rejected and that we will take aggressive steps because the data demonstrates that we have achieved every target that they asked us in the FATF regime to achieve and therefore the EU’s utilization of the FATF methodology is wrong and it is inappropriate and we intend to take that charge squarely to the European Union by way of discussions and the European Council as the next review that we have is in the month of November.

I can report to the country that I have been in discussions with the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force with all of the Attorneys General and relevant participants as to a unified approach and I note that Caricom has already written as we requested to the European Union and to the European Commission in this regard. We cannot be allowed to de-bank or de-risk ourselves in this fashion.

Madam Speaker, I want to point out a very important operational function in the civil asset forfeiture law. This country will not know but I can report now that by use of the unexplained wealth order provisions that we have had matters go before the court, unexplained wealth orders are in the system, and I am in receipt of a desiccated report at arm’s length that we have several more matters for unexplained wealth orders about to hit the system and I do believe that this is a
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legislative provision as operationalized which will sober Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I can tell you that the gaming legislation is critical to our anti-money laundering, CFT (Countering Financing of Terrorism), proliferation of financing mechanisms and we have completed the review of that law, we have made adjustments to that law, we will be bringing it back to the Parliament. I know that the Opposition’s position is that they will not support it and therefore, we will address the law in the proper functions that we have to ensure passage of that law. Trinidad and Tobago cannot be the only country identified by the IMF to have an unregulated sector. That is not acceptable for this Government and for the people of this country.

Madam Speaker, we have made sweeping amendments inside of the Companies Registry and in the Land Registry. Permit me to stick a pin now. I acknowledge and I fed the hon. Prime Minister with statistics coming out of the Registrar General’s office which show that as a result of the COVID pandemic and the difficulties in the management of certain aspects of the system, that the data which I have been tracking is not satisfactory. We have three registries at the Registrar General: the Civil Registry which is births, deaths, adoptions, marriages, et cetera; the Land Registry and the Companies Registry.

Upon taking office in 2015, there was no investment in the IT systems of the registry. We went out as a Government and we procured a new Companies Registry. We accelerated the implementation of the Property Business Real Estate Solution for a new Land Registry and, Madam Speaker, we introduced electronic payments and electronic filings. What does this mean to us?

Right now, we see on average 15,000 people by way of foot traffic per month in the Registrar General’s office. And I am pleased to say that Trinidad and
Tobago, as I am told, is the only Government Ministry at the Registrar General’s end of our Ministry to actually have online payments for the services that we do. You can apply for birth certificates, death certificates, et cetera, certain documents and TTPost will bring it to you. I want to correct something that I saw in the public domain. No one has to go through an application of a number of days for a death certificate. Walk-in clients receive their death certificates immediately and I have confirmed that with the Registrar General. If funeral homes choose to do that and charge people, that is not the Registrar General’s provision.

I can tell you now, October 26, 2020, we go live with the search requirements at the property business real estate solution. That, Madam Speaker, is a nuclear solution for Trinidad and Tobago. What is that about? The Property Information Management System (PIMS) at the registry is an archaic system that broke down many years ago. This Government digitized millions of records, uploaded it into a new system and we have been test driving that system with the lawyers, the C4 committee of the Law Association for over two and a half years. That system is now working. On October 26th, we will have the ability to do all searches for Real Property Act and what we call old law Act online from your office. That means you do not need to come into the registry.

More particularly, we are training, beginning this week and I will put out a public notice to that effect, the title abstractors and lawyers and we are offering those persons who are registered $2,500 per entity registered with credit for search functionality so we can test the system in a robust way. We are also immediately expanding the physical capacity at the registry because the COVID restrictions were very difficult to manage, so we have had to take hard Plexiglas, stalls, in conjunction with advice from the CMO so that we will have a doubling of capacity.
in terms of position. And importantly, we have procured a queue management system, an application for appointment system so that we can immediately see a rapid rise in functionality.

But this electronic system that I have referred you to, the property and business real estate solution system is critical. Why? It is critical for Tobago. With that system, we have every geographical information map, land survey map and we are ready, Madam Speaker, let me repeat this, we are ready to launch the land adjudication system, the land tribunal system, the Registration of Titles to Land Act suite. Madam Speaker, that law lay on the books of Trinidad and Tobago from 1999. This year, we will be launching that system because it needed the PBRS system to work. You had to have the technology to make it work and therefore, Tobago will finally receive the solution to its land titling issues.

Madam Speaker, it is no coincidence that this Government, under Prime Minister, hon. Dr. Keith Rowley has brought forward this system. Why? Because we are the only Government who are willing to win the popular vote in Tobago because we at least run in a Tobago election. [Desk thumping] I do not know what solace my honourable colleagues opposite take in saying that they do not run in Tobago, they are not interested in representing the people of Tobago. My colleagues, the Member for Tobago East, the Member for Tobago West, the hon. Prime Minister—

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, on a point of order, 48(6). The Member is imputing improper motives.

Madam Speaker: I overrule. Please continue.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Madam Speaker. My colleagues, the hon. Prime Minister, Member for Tobago East, the Member for Tobago West, the hon.
Minister of Agriculture, Clarence Rambharat, the combined efficiencies of the Minister of Planning and the Attorney General, Registrar General, we will solve the issues in Tobago because we gave a commitment to that. The same way we will finish the Tobago independence conversation, we have brought the legislation, the Joint Select Committee will go back to work. It requires a three-quarters majority. It is left to be seen whether people who are proud to have no representation in Tobago by way of electoral running will support that legislation because only with the UNC’s support will that law pass.

Madam Speaker, permit me to address the fact that we intend to bring public procurement legislation to this Parliament. I can report that I have just finished discussions with the Public Procurement Regulator who is now sending me further consultation inputs that he received from various stakeholders so that we can settle the draft regulations and deal with the final amendments. Campaign finance reform is returning to the Parliament to go into Joint Select Committee. It is a simple majority law which we intend to complete with immediacy. Local government reform as well with immediacy. The revenue authority has been redrafted and will return to the Parliament.

Madam Speaker, let me put this forward. Same way there was “ah song and ah hue and ah cry” by the Opposition when we brought the Criminal Division. If you recall, the Opposition did not support the Criminal Division legislation. There was protest outside the court—the Hall of Justice. People in this country, trade union leaders said that we were going to fire people. You know what happened, Madam Speaker? We employed 1,000 new people, nobody lost their jobs. [Desk thumping] So I would like to tell the people of this country do not listen to bramble, ole talk and fear mongering. These are equal to more jobs and facilities.
Madam Speaker, as I only have a couple of minutes left, permit me to say to the people of San Fernando West, finally our waterfront is up and running. [Desk thumping] Finally our 11 HDC communities received repairs. Finally our 6,500 people in San Fernando West who are in squatting conditions have a Housing Village Improvement Programme where they could hold their heads up with dignity to not live in squalor and condition. Finally, hundreds of homes are being built in San Fernando.

So, Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my colleagues, in particular, the hon. Prime Minister for ensuring that the San Fernando development, our Magistrates’ Court at Irvine Park, 75,000 square feet, up and being built. Our Family Court at the Cluny Building about to embark, all things ready for that. Our 11 HDC communities; our Waterfront Development; the car park at the San Fernando General Hospital for 1,000 car parks; the 750 homes being built at the PTSC site; the 241 homes being built at the Ministry of Works site; the road improvement and road widening; the walkway across at Embacadere, the redevelopment of Carlton Lane. Madam Speaker, finally, the citizens of San Fernando have a reason to celebrate that a Government supports them in the most profound way. [Desk thumping] It is tough, it will be stretched a little bit. We are improving their access to jobs. We are making sure that people survive. Madam Speaker, this is not an easy year or an easy budget but it is something that if we all contribute to and in particular, I would like to report that my discussions with some of the persons at the Public Services Association at the Registrar General’s office, they have been very good. I have received commitment that there will be improvements and functionality across the State sectors.

Madam Speaker, the unique identification number for every citizen, the
unitization of approvals and procedures, e-payments as we will bring to Parliament almost in November immediately, the ability for full online functionality and payments, the best days of Trinidad and Tobago are ahead of us. Fortunately, we were prepared and we did our work and therefore, we were not caught in too much of a difficulty in moving to an online environment. We intend to see successes moving forward. And, Madam Speaker, with those words, I thank you for this opportunity to report. **[Desk thumping]**

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Members, before calling on the next speaker, may I take this opportunity to apologize to the hon. Member for Chaguanas East for not having recognized earlier her maiden contribution. I correct that omission now and I congratulate her on her maiden contribution. **[Desk thumping]**

**Mr. Saddam Hosein (Barataria/San Juan):** Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me to join this debate on this Appropriation Bill to provide for the goods and services of the people of Trinidad and Tobago for fiscal year 2021. Let me first take the opportunity, Madam Speaker, to congratulate the hon. Opposition Leader, the Member for Siparia, on an excellent contribution. **[Desk thumping]** She has clearly debunked the Government’s propaganda, dissected their budget and exposed their half-truths and innuendos. I am proud to be a Member of the team that she leads. I know when it comes to defending the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, we will never give up that fight. No surrender, no retreat. **[Desk thumping]**

My first response to a national budget as an elected Member of the Parliament serving the constituents of Barataria/San Juan, I am honoured to be your voice in this House today. I want to reaffirm my commitment to the people of Barataria/San Juan that I will always listen and voice their concerns in this House
and represent them to the very best of my ability. [Desk thumping]

Now, permit me, Madam Speaker, to just respond to a few matters that the Attorney General would have put on public record. Now, I heard the Attorney General boasting about putting up tents outside social development buildings for persons to access grants. Madam Speaker, after $6 billion, the Attorney General can shamelessly come to this House and boast that you have tent for people to line up on in the hot sun to access “ah $1,500 grant”. That is what they come to this Parliament to boast about? Then he speaks about spending less at the Ministry of the Attorney General, but what he forgot to tell the population is that he lost more cases than the last Government. [Desk thumping]

And then “he call and he sing and he dance about how much laws he passed”: amendments to the Criminal Division, bail, anti-gang, you spoke of Magistrates’ Courts protection, reform of the Magistrates’ Court system and then a few days ago, we heard the Chief Justice announcing to this country that the criminal justice system is on the verge of collapse. [Desk thumping] So when he tells the population do not listen to bramble and ole talk, you must ignore the Government, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

And all of that work that he has talked about, that has been done at the office of the DPP, of a new building in Port of Spain and some new accommodation in Tobago, you have the Chief Justice saying that there are only 12 indictments filed for the last year. We are on a verge of collapse, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping] We are on a verge of collapse. Then he gives a long list of achievements, so-called achievements but no statistics to justify the performance of what he has done.

I heard he talked about some system working, I do not know which system is that but that system probably has a virus in it because under a lockdown, you still
cannot reduce crime. You come to talk about “we having ah SoE in the last government” but you had a lockdown right in this year and you still had murders spiralling. So we totally reject your argument. [Desk thumping]

Then I heard he spoke about the Land Registry. Well, the woes at the Land Registry started way before COVID. It was through your mismanagement and incompetence that somebody cannot get a deed registered until about six to eight weeks in this country and you cannot get an appointment to access the services at the registries until next year, 2021. [Desk thumping]

And then we heard the famous promise: “coming soon, procurement legislation”. Procurement legislation, just like the PNM, promises never materialize. [Desk thumping] Six years now, this country is waiting for procurement legislation after we have seen the wanton wastage and corruption under the last five years by this Government led by the Member for Diego Martin West. [Desk thumping]

Now, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance, he spoke for about three hours and after that, the country is still plagued with unemployment, perennial flooding, a murder rate that is out of control and COVID-19 infections on the rise and deaths. This budget was simply uninspiring, uninteresting, tedious, dull, repetitive and just simply boring. [Desk thumping] This budget can only be described as a plethora of old, rehashed, repeated and broken promises. PNM, promises never materialize. It brings no hope for prosperity. This budget is, in fact, an insult to the idea of recovery. In these strange, harsh economic times, people want jobs, they want food, they need money. But instead, you know what they got? One of the longest budget speeches in the history of our Parliament. This Government promised to move Trinidad and Tobago into the digital age when
in fact, the only digital aspect about this budget is copying and pasting last year’s budget.

Just one year ago, the Minister of Finance came to this Parliament, patted himself on the back, “he has stabilized the economy, that it was growing”. He boasted that the economy has turned around, it was booming. It was so magical that he proclaimed he must be a wizard. So let me get this correct, Madam Speaker. The same economy that the Minister of Finance boasted that he stabilized and grew by doing it his way is somewhat now in trouble. And then what does he do? He blames everyone else for the state of the economy—and I welcome him to the Chamber. He blames COVID-19, he blames the drop in energy prices, he blames the Member for Siparia. Madam Speaker, there is only one person to be blamed and that is the Minister of Finance. [Desk thumping] He is responsible for the state of the economy, he said he did it his way.

Let us look, let us look at the simple facts that they have crashed the economy long before COVID. [Desk thumping] COVID-19 did not shut down Petrotrin which caused 9,000 workers to go home. COVID-19 did not cause 500 TSTT employees to be sent home. COVID-19 did not cause over 340 UTT employees to be fired. COVID-19 did not cause the Tobago economy to suffer due to the collapse of the sea bridge. It was your failure, your mismanagement and your incompetence. [Desk thumping]

He will blame a reduction in oil prices for the state of our economy. His first budget presentation as the Minister of Finance, he acknowledged that there has been a reduction in energy prices. This was in 2015 and every other budget, he would say the same but he stood by idly, twiddling his thumbs while revenue continued to fall and did nothing to ensure that there was another stream of
revenue. He has failed to take any steps to diversify the economy. And while I agree that you cannot diversify overnight, had he taken the necessary measures since 2015, today, we would have some other sustainable stream of revenue. Due to their omissions and neglect, they have set Trinidad and Tobago back by almost 10 years. You should have continued what we started.

We started sport tourism, medical tourism, education tourism. They are only interested in borrowing. In fact, they sent public debt to the highest level in the history of our country. In September 2019, the Auditor General reported that public debt stood at $124 billion. The Prime Minister boasted during the Spotlight how good he is at borrowing but scoffs at the idea of diversification. So when “yuh boast that yuh doing it your way”, then only you alone can be blamed for the abysmal state of our economy. [Desk thumping]

And while other countries are trying to develop new creative and innovative ways to raise revenue, in Trinidad and Tobago, this Government decides to raise revenue by taxing apples and grapes. You know our neighbour right in Barbados is looking to get revenue through work tourism, the Barbados Welcome Stamp. Jamaica has realized the need for emphasis on areas such as manufacturing, e-commerce, global services sector, health care and biotechnology, logistic services, renewable energy on agriculture. But our Government’s most brilliant idea is tax on apples and grapes. “Imagine the apple to eat have ah tax but yuh Apple iPhone have no tax.” So while other countries are finding creative ways to survive, the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister looking for “ah bank or ah friend tuh borrow money from”. They are completely disconnected with the reality on the ground. [Desk thumping]

A large number of persons visited my office, Madam Speaker, and
complained that they did not receive their salary relief grant or rental assistance grant. This after the Minister of Finance can boldfacedly tell the population that they have spent $6 billion on COVID relief. I echo the call of the Leader of the Opposition for a complete and forensic investigation into the expenditure of this $6 billion. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I now turn to the most burning issue that has been plaguing our society for too long. That is the issue of crime. People in this country are fearful. They are terrified and afraid for their safety and the safety of their loved ones. As the Government continues to place the heavy burden on the population through the loss of jobs and more taxes, you will see a direct increase in the number of robberies and other related crimes. We have already seen an increase in the number of home invasions.

11.30 a.m.

They have caused people to lose their livelihoods and force them to turn to a life of crime just to survive. Our country, for the last five years, has seen an unprecedented rate of crime and it will only get worse. In San Juan, just in one week, there were about four robberies where the owner of a popular grocery on the Eastern Main Road was shot and killed during that robbery.

The Government has terminated crime prevention programmes, reduced resources to the TTPS, which result in the low detection rates. And when it comes to the convictions, the Chief Justice complains that the criminal justice system is on the verge of collapse. They have ensured that the only industry in this country that is booming is the criminal industry.

For five years they had no plan to deal with national security. We have seen no new measures or steps taken to curb the runaway crime situation. And they may
be so tempted to come to this House and twist and turn and try to manipulate the figures in an attempt to paint a different picture. But you see, Madam Speaker, facts are stubborn things because they never change.

Every year they throw billions of dollars towards national security without receiving value for money. You must be strategic in your spending. But it would seem as though any conversation on return on investment is too much to ask this Government for.

Imagine the Minister of National Security spent most of his time on matters of energy rather than the steps he will take to keep our citizens safe during his budget contribution. He was totally unprepared, insipid and winged a poor presentation last Friday. [Desk thumping] He was shouting, screaming and throwing tantrums blaming everyone else for his incompetence. And after spending over $40 billion on national security they have presided over 2,382 murders for the last five years, with 2019 being the second highest murder toll in the history of our country.

In the Member for Siparia’s contribution, the Leader of the Opposition, she forecasted a total shut down of the TTPS due to the reduction in the allocation given to them. The Government has reduced the allocations in the budget for the TTPS by $261 million. They were allocated $2.61 billion in fiscal 2020, and that has been reduced to 2.35 billion in fiscal 2021.

Their goods and services have been reduced by $181 million. This is what the yellow books are showing us. Therefore, the TTPS will be starved of resources to function efficiently. But you know what they rather allocate moneys on, $15 million for the President’s House; $8 million for the construction of the PM's residence in Tobago; $7 million for White Hall restoration; $3 million for the
Stollmeyer’s Castle; and $3 million for the Mille Fleurs building, while the police have no money in this country to buy cars and fill gas and pay bills. [Desk thumping] They continue to empty the Treasury on all of these vanity projects. This is the caring and responsible Government that they boast about.

You know, last January, that is January 2019, we learnt that there were over 500 police vehicles taken out of service. The Commissioner of Police complained that there is a lack of maintenance of the vehicles which caused the removal of those vehicles from service. But instead of ensuring vehicles are properly maintained, the Minister cuts the allocation for maintenance of vehicles by $20 million. This means less police vehicles on the road, longer response time. And when you have an issue and call the police station, you are bound to hear that we do not have a vehicle at this time. And at the end of the day, the Minister would blame the police and not himself.

The Minister of Finance also mentioned in his presentation a mobile command centre for the TTPS. So we will have a mobile command centre with no mobility. Madam Speaker, I am compelled to believe that sometimes the comedy writes itself. And if you juxtapose that with the fact that we have a coast guard that cannot sail and an air guard that cannot fly.

Let us look at the Minor Equipment Purchases. The Minister of Finance boasted that there will be greater technology in the TTPS for the use of GPS, real time cameras, CCTV command centres, body cameras and drones. But you know what the reality is, that they have cut the allocation of the TTPS for Minor Equipment Purchases by, how much?—$65 million, only allocating $7 million to the TTPS. That is enough to pay some phone bills of some Ministers, pay for Wi-Fi and phone cards for the TTPS.
Now, I heard the Minister of National Security boasting about the demonetization of the $100 notes. He gloated about the successes of that exercise. And to this day, we are unsure about the cost of that exercise. It continues to be a secret. What we know for sure is the hardship that many citizens faced as a result of it, where elderly persons were suffering in long bank lines just to secure their savings.

Let us examine where the successes were. The Minister said of the estimated $8 billion notes in circulation, they received $7.5 billion worth of exchange notes, which means that about $500 million in notes did not return, and they call that dirty money. And after all of that “flams” and all of that inconvenience, did anybody get lockup? One pastor came with $28 million and another barber with one million and not a single charge; not a single charge. But right under their nose, there is a $92 million sou sou running.

The Minister went further to say that there were some old notes resurfacing around election time and he knew which side of the aisle that was on. Because he must have been aware of the PNM advertisement where they were using old cotton notes in a piggy bank. Is that the dirty money that they were speaking about? What was the PNM doing with the old $100 notes?

Under the People’s Partnership Government we had established the National Operations Center, which was an agency which fused intelligence, information sharing, operations and de-siloed the various arms of national security and other agencies to ensure that they worked in harmony for quick, strategic and efficient action.

When we left office in 2015, it was fully functional. It was this Government that dismantled the NOC and had they not done so, there would have been a
significant decrease in crime. So after they shut down the NOC, they come five years later, change the name of the centre from the National Operations Centre to the National Operations Fusion Centre and called that an achievement. Changing your name is not an achievement. The Attorney General should know that. And just like how they changed the name of the Couva children’s hospital to the Couva Hospital and called that an achievement. [Desk thumping]

Domestic violence, Madam Speaker, has been one of the major issues affecting our population. For the Law Term 2018/2019, according to the annual report of the Judiciary, there were 7,519 domestic violence applications filed in the Magistrates’ Court in Trinidad and Tobago. Recently we have seen the gruesome murder of women in this country and we must act now. The Member for Tobago East cannot just give out phone numbers to hotlines and expect that to be all.

I heard the Minister of National Security talk about electronic bracelets. When they came into Government they met the Administration of Justice (Electronic Monitoring) Act and sat on it for five years, and today we hear about it is coming soon. Again, PNM promises never materialize.

Then I heard the Minister talk about gender-based violence units. Where is the allocation for this in the yellow books? What about sexual victims unit, where is the allocation? From January 2020 to June 2020, there were 249 reports of sexual offences according to the TTPS. There must be a specialized unit equipped to deal with the victims of sexual abuse. There must be a facility to ensure that they are interviewed in a safe and comfortable environment; not sitting outside the waiting area of a police station. The DNA swabs must be taken in a credible and timely manner and they must be kept away from the public’s eyes. But instead of taking care of these victims, $15 million allocated for the President’s House.
The Minister of National Security responded to the Leader of the Opposition of the issue of porous borders, and he said that that is a ridiculous narrative. The only thing ridiculous is the Minister’s performance for the last five years. He remains ignorant and unaware that these borders are porous. It is absolutely shocking, Madam Speaker. And after he took no steps to protect the borders for the last five years, he now comes to deny the fact that our borders are porous.

And one of them, I suspect it is the Member for Laventille West, will stand up to speak about the OPVs. But I must remind him from now, because I may anticipate him, that that contract was cancelled and the Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government was able to recover $1 billion to the people of Trinidad and Tobago after the arbitration. [Desk thumping]

And the point is that had you maintained the current naval assets, through the Damen vessels that we currently have, you would have been able to tighten the borders and ensure that there were not many guns and illegal immigrants entering our borders through the various illegal ports.

And due to the open borders, Madam Speaker, there has been an influx of illegal Venezuelans in our country. The Minister keep saying that there are 16,523 registered Venezuelans. Well he needs to understand because that is all that is registered does not mean that that is all that exist. There are much more illegal immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago. He was extremely silent on the one-year policy. When this one year expires, you decided to give an additional six months. Now when the six months expires, what are you going to do? You have no answers because of your half-baked, wishy washy, hodgepodge policy when it comes to Venezuela. And that may be very deliberate, having regard to the relationship that this Government shares with the Maduro regime.
Recently we have seen a spike in young teenagers that are missing. The TTPS will issue releases informing the public with the #helpfindme. Over the weekend Shaniqua Ifill of Persad Lane, El Socorro, someone in my constituency, went missing, and I do hope all that can be done to ensure the safe return of Shaniqua and those other persons that went missing. My heart and my prayers are with you and your family.

I heard the Minister mention the TTPS marine and riverine branch that is currently operating but, Madam Speaker, there is no boat and no jetty. The Minister may have dreamt this before he came to the Parliament. According to the yellow books, this is a new project for 2021, so how could it be up and running? The sad part about this is that there is only an allocation of $500,000 which was given to the establishment of the coastal unit. Madam Speaker, that cannot even buy a boat, far less for a pirogue. The jetty will cost three times what the allocation is. With that allocation the TTPS cannot even conduct tours in the bird sanctuary.

With regard to the prison service, the country has now become numb with the murder of prison officers. We have recently seen two officers being gunned down in the most gruesome manner. A few weeks ago, I met with the Prison Officers Association and they told me of their plight and frustration, and with this budget, I can see it is the same repeated broken promises that they are accustomed to. The jammers and grabbers are non-functional. The alarm system in the prison is not working. The prison condition is deplorable and there is no adequate protection for the safety of the officers and their families.

Let us look at the investment in the young people and the community. Today I commend the officers who dedicate their time and effort to the police youth clubs and keeping it active. The respect that they got this year in the budget was a cut in
allocation from $6 million to $2.7 million, while the Prime Minister’s residence in Tobago gets $8 million.

The Kamla Persad-Bissessar-led Government adopted a policy to commit the payment of $1 million to the estate of each of the members of the protective services who were killed in the line of duty. It seems that the Government has completely ignored that policy and threw it away in a bin. When you look at the 2020 Revised Estimates, not a single dollar was paid to the estate of any police officer. This was to ensure that those officers who place their lives on the online every day and sometimes are the sole breadwinner for their family, their spouses can continue to run the household and ensure that their children can go to school. That is the caring Government that they boast about. They are just about broken promises, again old talk and mamaguy.

Madam Speaker, I also want to make some comments on now what we call the Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. On the 28th of August, 2020, we were shocked, but not surprised, when the Attorney General brought a Bill for debate but failed to bring the regulations, which has now made the wearing of face mask mandatory in public. We in the Opposition were not given the chance to scrutinize, comment and propose any amendments to these regulations in the interest of the citizenry. This move by the Attorney General makes me wonder if the AG is not brave enough to bring these regulations to the Parliament. Is he so afraid to bring the regulations for parliamentary scrutiny? Is the Government now a law made unto itself? The Parliament is supposed to be the seat of democracy, and I dare say the manner in which this Government operates is diametrically opposed to the tenets of democracy.

Madam Speaker, till date we have had 29 versions of the COVID-19
Regulations, 29, and some of which arose out of sheer incompetence of the AG in his drafting, simple and common mistakes. We have seen regulations being changed overnight. Most recently, Regulation No. 24, issued on the 16th of August and Regulation No. 25 being issued the very next day, as a result of certain clauses which were left out and had to be included in the latter. This has been the trend with these regulations and their general handling of the pandemic, flip flop. So how can we be satisfied that these regulations are being made in the interest of the people when simple errors such as these are being made?

Justice Boodoosingh recently in a judgment entitled CV 2020-01370 Dominic Suraj and Others against The Attorney General and Satyanand Maharaj against the Attorney General, at paragraphs 110 and 111, the honourable judge had this to say, and I quote from the judge. The judge said:

“In my view, there ought really to be no objection in principle to some form of Parliamentary scrutiny to Regulations being made which, even if justifiable, impact on the freedoms of citizens...I would, however, urge the Attorney General to consider, at minimum, some form of appropriate Parliament scrutiny for Regulations made by the executive where normal every day freedoms are affected, as has occurred here”.

This is the court urging the Attorney General to bring regulations to this Parliament. If he does not want to do it by way of affirmative resolution, due to the expediency, you can do it through negative resolution. The court is urging the Attorney General to bring the regulations to the Parliament. So I ask, Madam Speaker: Why is the Attorney General evading the Parliament? We are in unprecedented times, and more so now we need to protect our citizenry from the harsh realities that are facing this nation and this Government. They talk about
cooperating to deal with the pandemic and not politicizing it, and so on, but they have been the ones to adopt the highhanded approach.

The AG hides behind an archaic colonial piece of law where the Minister of Health can curtail fundamental human rights and freedoms. They are making law with the stroke of a pen. They are evading the people and the Parliament. During a pandemic the rule of law is not dead and democracy is not suspended. [Desk thumping]

For anyone who will listen, the AG has a knack for listing achievements. But Madam Speaker he will paint a picture that we have the most efficient criminal justice system on the planet. He will come to this Parliament, repeat the same things over and over while the system is collapsing under his watch. You will hear him talk about new Criminal Procedure Rules; CourtPay; district criminal and traffic court—same old building “eh”—decriminalization of marijuana, but with the TTPS do not have ticket books to fine anyone; public defenders, but legal aid attorneys are not being paid; follow the money laws; e-filing. You know some persons told me it is like Al-Rawi in wonderland.

Last Wednesday the Chief Justice declared, Madam Speaker, that the criminal justice system is on the verge of collapse. So for the last five years we passed all those laws, spent so much money and heard too much of the Attorney General and the CJ announced that the system is on the verge of collapse. That is the reality. That is the incompetence of this Government. And after 536 murders were recorded for the last year, only 12, 12 indictments have been filed in the High Court. The Attorney General must answer for the resources being allocated to the DPP and what is position regarding staffing, or are they wasting money on foreign investigators?
Arising out of a JSC report on an enquiry into the adequacy of Magistrate’s Courts facilities during the Fifth Session of the Eleventh Parliament several recommendations were made which required immediate and urgent steps to be taken to improve the situation with the courts after the states of the courts in that report was described as woefully inadequate; woefully inadequate, Madam Speaker.

In this day and age we have a population subjected to these conditions. We do not need a report to tell us of the state of the disrepair, unsanitary and inadequate facilities of these courts. If the Attorney General bothers to even attend the court he can make these observations for himself. He will boast about virtual hearings but will not tell you what the reality is. The links to access the hearings are not sent to the litigants or attorneys on time. There is no scheduling process to allow for the efficiency it should achieve, but instead we have virtual chaos and congestion. The scheduling of matters in the Magistrates’ Court is chaotic and now more than ever these hearings are just adjournment hearings; a virtual disappointment.

Now, there is one issue the Attorney General also raised, Madam Speaker, which had to do with the blacklist of Trinidad and Tobago by the OECD. And there is an article by KPMG dated October 06, 2020, an online article, titled Caiman Island and Oman delisted. It state that Trinidad and Tobago remained on the EU’s blacklist. You will remember earlier it year in March, we gave the Government the support to pass this tax information sharing laws, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping] We gave them the support. The Opposition did its part. We were told that this is FATCA on steroids; if these Bills were not passed the effects would be devastating for Trinidad and Tobago; we will loss correspondent banking; there
will be no supply of EU notes to our Central Bank; no credit card transactions; and the suspension of money services as Western Union and MoneyGram. It was as though the sky was falling, Madam Speaker. It was Chicken Licken. Then today, after we supported the Bills, why are we still on the blacklist? Why is Trinidad and Tobago not removed? [Desk thumping] And then the Attorney General will come this morning to blame the EU. Their policy is always different from their action.

You will remember their behaviour during FATCA, when they scared the population that we will lose banking relations with the US. But three years later, they risk our relationship with the US by sneaking in Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez in Trinidad and Tobago while our borders were closed. They are the ones to be blamed, Madam Speaker.

A few days ago, I heard a popular calypso sung by the Mighty Sparrow on radio, “You Can’t get away from the Tax”. And after I heard this budget it was a remix of this song. And it goes like this, Madam Speaker:

If you want to eat apple and grapes
you can’t get away from the tax
If you want to own property or even if you squatting
you can’t gateway from the tax
If you want to buy a motor car
you can’t get away from de the tax
And even if you are shopping online
you can’t get away from the tax
But if you want to join the yachting industry
you could get away from the tax
And if you want to build a complex on Picton Street
They are trying to keep the economy alive, but taxing and taking from the population, while Ministers recuse themselves for 37 and 53 times from the Cabinet. The Minister announced that property tax is coming. According to the law, the Government can only collect property tax when 50 per cent of the properties in Trinidad and Tobago are valued. I would like the Minister of Finance to show us the area on the maps which have been valued. Is it the 19 constituencies on this side of the House? What is the total number of properties in Trinidad and Tobago to determine 50 per cent?

It has been brought to my attention, Madam Speaker, that the Valuation Division is working feverishly to populate the valuation rolls so that the property tax can be calculated and collected. Government wants to ensure that it collects property taxes in these harsh economic times.

I have a memorandum dated September 01, 2020, and this memorandum came from Mrs. Emeris Garraway-Howell, the Acting Commissioner of Valuations.

To all valuators/heads of regions

Subject: Processing of work for the Valuation Roll Development

And in this memorandum, Madam Speaker, a directive has been given that they must now ramp up to valuation exercise to populate the valuation roll. And I am informed of the practice that is taking place at that division right now. Is that if a person had submitted a deed for the purposes of stamp duty, in terms of purchasing a property or by way a deed of gift, and a value is being given in order to calculate what the stamp duty will be, the Valuation Division is now using that value placed on the stamp duty to assess your property tax. Madam Speaker, that is an illegal
exercise that is taking place. You cannot use the value used to calculate stamp duty to assess property tax. It is two different bases. One is determined on market value; the other one is determined on the annual rental value. They are placing a value on your property without you completing a valuation return form, which is a requirement under the law. The purpose for which you are submitting your information was for stamp duty and not for property tax. So they are using your information for another purpose. This practice must stop, Madam Speaker, as it is illegal. It is a shortcut method, Madam Speaker.

I am further informed that valuators are conducting curbside valuations. And there is a document titled “Process for Use of Data from the District Revenue Office” by the Valuations Division, to facilitate the development of the valuation roll. And this document is also signed off by the Acting Commissioner of Valuations dated the 11th of August, 2020, where they are talking about curbside/roadside valuations for property, and there is a list of items that they are asking people to do. To take photos, to take GPS coordinates, to look to see how much toilet somebody have. I do not know how they are looking at that from outside of the building. They want to find out “how much porch”, carports, pools, storage areas, sheds, if you have. They want to find out about the construction details, foundation if possible, beams columns, AC. “So dey standing up by de road, Madam Speaker, and taking pictures of your house tuh see how much air conditions yuh have and how much bathrooms yuh have, and how much pool yuh have.” And this, Madam Speaker, is a completely shortcut and illegal method. They have to perform the proper valuations for persons in order to get what they required in order to pay their property tax.

And this property tax that they collect, Madam Speaker, is not going back to
the community. It will go to pay rentals in St. Clair and vanity projects. It will not be directed towards fixing roads, clearing drains, spraying for mosquitoes or the eradication of African snails. We call on this Government to hold its hand on property tax, especially during these harsh economic times. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, there is one other issue I wish to raise after reading the road map committee report, the phase two report. During the election campaign it was proposed that a UNC Government would have set up the national infrastructure fund, which would have been capitalized using cash balances of state-controlled institutions like NIB and UTC. And when that was proposed, all hell break loose for the Prime Minister. He is shouting and griping all over TV that the UNC is coming for UTC money. Well it seems that the Prime Minister is not aware of what is happening in his own Cabinet. Madam Speaker, imagine he sets up a recovery committee and this committee in charge of the strategies and affairs of the economy in the upcoming years and he did not bother to read the report.

At page 109 of the phase two road map report, the committee proposed that to fund the next three months of expenditure from their menu of revenue raising measures, they propose to take US $500 million or TT $3.365 billion from the UTC. What does UTC means? Does it mean the Unit Trust Corporation? Is this the same UTC that the Prime Minister was griping all over the country about? That is the hypocrisy we have grown accustomed to. It shows that they are only interested in propaganda and bacchanal. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, as the Member of Parliament for Barataria/San Juan, my constituency has several issues, which I hope some of the $49.5 billion can be allocated to fix. We would like to see the replacement of the woefully old and non-functional pumps in El Socorro south to alleviate the flooding issue. Drainage
issues in Todd Street; Sadhoo Trace; Abass Avenue; Swami Avenue; Oudan Trace; Tenth Avenue; Fourth Street in Barataria; Don Miguel Road; the Eastern Main Road; Saddle Road; and the El Socorro Main Road. We would like the following roads to be paved: New Lane; Ibis Drive; Ramkhelawan Drive; Beharry Drive; Ramcharan Street; Khanchan Street.

We would like WASA to look at the residents on Second Street as they have blocked sewers and low water pressure. So I urge the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West to look into that.

Several residents in the area also request assistance to connect their residents into the central sewer system. When you look at the San Juan Market, Madam Speaker, in a pandemic, imagine no fans are working. After $49.5 billion is being expended and allocated, they cannot buy two Lasko fans to put in the San Juan Market.

12.00 noon

The ceiling is collapsing and the toilets are locked out for the vendors and also for the users of the market. Other issues are that the pensioners are having difficulties in obtaining their pensions at the office in MTS Plaza. We have unfinished schools, Barataria North Secondary School and the San Juan Government Primary School.

And I would like to also inform you, Madam Speaker, of some of the work that we have done right in Barataria/San Juan. We have distributed over 625 food hampers in the constituency, distributed wheelchairs, 549 SEA packages donated to every single standard five SEA student in the Barataria/San Juan constituency. We distributed fans, we cleared drains, Madam Speaker, all of this without any assistance of the Government. Cutting and cleaning of recreational grounds,
hosting of legal aid clinics, and we distributed thousands of cloth face masks for the fight against COVID-19.

Madam Speaker, we also initiated the student help desk at the MP’s office where we offer free printing, e-mail, and Internet access to students who do not have devices. And we have had visitors from neighbouring constituencies, 93 persons from Laventille East/Morvant, 57 persons from St. Joseph, and 53 persons from St. Ann’s East, the constituency of the Minister of Education. And what is more hurtful, Madam Speaker, is that the constituents of the Minister of Education had to come to my office for assistance for printing. These Cabinet Ministers have failed to properly represent their constituents and, Madam Speaker, I will continue to assist any person that comes to my office. [Desk thumping] We have an ongoing book drive where we have collected hundreds of books and distribution is currently ongoing.

Madam Speaker, as I close I want to close by saying that today this Government is asking the population to trust them and believe them; before the elections they told the population according to Oxford that they were number one in the world in handling COVID. Today, we have over 5,000 positive cases and 90 deaths. There is a crisis of confidence in the Government. We cannot continue to conduct business as usual. This is business unusual. For the last five years we have seen a direct correlation between a decrease in Government’s performance and a sharp increase in their incompetence. Madam Speaker, persons in this country are struggling to make ends meet. There is a sense of hopelessness and despair in this country. There is a struggle behind every dollar that is earned and with this Government the struggle is real. I thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]
Madam Speaker: Member for Laventille West.

The Minister of Youth Development and National Service (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me to make my contribution in this very important debate. Madam Speaker, I begin by thanking the hon. Prime Minister for his leadership, for his vision to—among many other things—establish the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service and for choosing yours truly to lead it. He could not have chosen a better man. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I would also like to thank my constituents who joined in with many others across Trinidad and Tobago to render to this Government the mandate that it has, so that we would continue the good work that we carried on in the last five years and in anticipation of further and improved work going forward. We thank them for their votes, we thank them for their support, we thank them for their understanding of the reality and we thank them for making the better choice—the best choice. I thank the Minister of Finance who steered this country, at least the lifeblood of it, the economy, for the past five years as astutely and wisely as he did. Anecdotally, you look at Trinidad and Tobago in the region and even in comparison to some of the developed states in the world and you could see that we are doing well. We have done well under the stewardship of the Minister of Finance [Desk thumping] and we thank him. We thank him for this budget which from all the reports, anecdotally as well, social media, talk shows, business chamber, across the board, apart from a few doubting Thomas and perpetual critics, the report has been very, very good and well received by the population the budget for 2021.

I would like to thank the Minister of Planning and Development who paid an
essential role in putting this wonderful edifice together. I call this budget “an
economic work of art”, Madam Speaker, and I would like to congratulate and to
thank all of those on this side who have spoken, elucidated as the Minister of
Finance explained and went into greater details which he could not do even in the
three plus hours that he spoke on the matters related to their particular Ministries
and portfolios. I ask that the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart as
I speak be acceptable in Jah sight. [Desk thumping]

I must begin with a little response to the Member for Barataria/San Juan who
said he anticipated me. I want to assure him the places he would go I would not,
the people he associated with I would not, and therefore he must not anticipate me.
I am a different kind of man. [Desk thumping] In fact, I am a living man and I got
work to do. Madam Speaker, he mentioned en passant that the Attorney General
imposed regulations, COVID regulation so to speak on this country without
bringing them here. Overlooking, lawyer as he is, that Mr. Justice Boodoosingh,
now I think a Justice of Appeal—not think, I am assured—he ruled that bringing
those regulations to this House was not necessary. [Desk thumping] You mean the
Member for Barataria/San Juan did not take note of that? It is not necessary.

He also told us shockingly, Madam Speaker, that this Government forced
persons because of their poverty and other such things to commit crime, sounding
as though he is justifying the commission of crimes in this country, and that the
Government forced people to do it. I want to ask him one thing. Who forced the
former Attorney General and a former Senator to find themselves in silver
bracelets today? The Government had nothing to do with that. In fact, they were
the Government, Madam Speaker, when the mess took place resulting in those
alleged crimes.
Madam Speaker, the Member for Chaguanas East, she told us that we scraped our way into Government with 22 seats. That coming from the Member from Chaguanas East could only be described as a naked untruth, Madam Speaker. We, Madam Speaker, we won a resounding victory in the elections and we have a mandate of the people of Trinidad and Tobago to execute that mandate. In fact, as I move on if there is any scraping you might find it on the desk on Charles Street where someone is holding onto the desk, “doh” want to let go, and there are nail prints and marks along the desk. May be another crime, malicious damage. But we are minding the business of this country and that is what we will do.

Madam Speaker, in 2015, among other things, the Prime Minister is quoted as saying, well I am quoting:

What drives me—meaning him, he the Prime Minister—is my responsibility to the nation’s youth. Before that we would engage in many discussions about the issues of the youth in the country, youth unemployment, youth delinquency, adolescent pregnancies. We as a Government we have been looking on all of this, thinking, particularly when we were in Opposition, thinking about ways in which we could resolve these issues for the young people and for Trinidad and Tobago. Looking at academic under performance in the formal education system, and in 2020 in response to those the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service too has been established to focus entirely on youth affairs, rather than the piecemeal way that it has been done in the past and of course recognizing that not every country including developed countries would carry a Ministry dealing specifically with youth. The issues of youth development and national service are therefore not new we have mooted, we have dealt with these
issues, we have a number of youth initiatives taking place since 1962, our independence in this country. Much has been done but this is a special focus on the business of youth.

The Prime Minister is further quoted as saying:

“Our country will be one in which young people feel confident in their own ideas to seek out and create their own opportunities, engendered by an education system that encourages entrepreneurship and innovation, and prepares learners to take advantage of the opportunities in a rapidly changing global environment.”

And he further said:

“Our investments in education will transform the country into a knowledge-based society that improves the ability of local businesses to compete globally. Greater emphasis will be placed on employing innovative practices, creative solutions, skills, ideas, and processes that, when combined, will act as a springboard for economic growth.”

Madam Speaker, the delivery of this goal does not lie with any single Ministry and it impacts on a large energetic and critical group which represents more than 54 per cent of this economy, this society, the youth. And all of this supports the Prime Minister’s decision to establish this Ministry.

So, Madam Speaker, the youth of our population is essentially the engine room of the population. You might recall Walter Rodney, in his writing how Europe underdeveloped Africa, identified that it was the youth of Africa during those years of slavery between the ages of 14 and 35 who were brought across the Atlantic for centuries. And he argued that that had the effect of quadrupling—quadrupling—sorry—quadrupling sorry, the work force, the strength, the life blood
of the economies that they went to, at the same time depleting the strength of the sending country. I say that analogy to demonstrate the power of the youth component.

We in Trinidad and Tobago are at the cusp of bringing to the Cabinet and to the Parliament and to the people a national youth policy. The international benchmark for youth is typically between to ages of 12 and 29 years. We are proposing, and I hope the Cabinet agrees, that we should go as deep as 10 and take the outer limit to age 35. As it now stands, the 12- to 29-year-olds account for about 54 per cent of this population. And if we extend in the way I have just proposed, Madam Speaker, that will take us to about closer to 60 per cent of the population, a very critical constituency to be trained, to be skilled, to be disciplined, to be nurtured, to be loved, to be prepared to be unleashed on this society in a way that it never has before. [Desk thumping] That, Madam Speaker, is where we come from.

Some of the programmes that are now in the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service came from national security, because there was a time when we saw those as crime resolving initiatives. We have moved on from that. We do not see the youth as a national security problem. We do not see them as a problem to be solved or fixed, rather we take a rights-based approach, a human development approach, and this is the reason why some of them have come to this Ministry. We see this cohort, we see this constituency, the youth of our nation, as being able to make a continual and improved, very significant contribution to the development of this country and its economy.

Madam Speaker, fundamentally, we do not see the concept of at-risk exclusively. There are at-risk individuals but we see all the youth of the nation,
whether described in that way or not, all of the young people of Trinidad and Tobago are important in the context of the work that we are set about to do. As I said we see the youth as a strength, as a resource, as an asset to be used, and to be directed for the benefit of this nation.

Madam Speaker, we have designed this national youth policy and as I said, that youth policy took its direction from the Vision 2030 development agenda for Trinidad and Tobago, the Roadmap to Recovery, which was a team led by Prof. Carl Theodore to point a way forward for this nation post-COVID. We looked as well at our party’s manifesto. We have a mandate that we have assured this country we would deliver, and of course we put those together and we came up with this national youth policy which will undergird and drive the work that we propose to do from the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service.

We have read the draft and we are in touch with the consultant. He consulted widely with the national community, but now that we have the draft we have made it available to a number of other key stakeholders. We expect prompt commentary on the draft policy from them, and we anticipate by the end of the November, Madam Speaker, the matter should be before the Cabinet for its approval and for dispensation for the benefit of the national community. [Desk thumping]

Qualitatively, youth is the defined as a phase in a person’s life where he or she moves from dependence to independence, and I might add interdependence. From school to the world of work. From dependence on parents to independent sources of income, and of course, usually, from your parents’ home to independent living independently. From close relationships—forming close relationship outside of one’s family. Having children and a family of their own. That typically—or those are the components, the elements as defined in the term or the concept of
As I indicated earlier, the international benchmark is from 12 to 29, we intend to deepen and to widen that as I have already indicated; not an insignificant constituency. And I have mandated our Ministry, Madam Speaker, and all our agencies and outposts that they must be wholly accessible to the youth of this nation. They must be welcoming to them. Most of all they must be listening to the youth of this nation, regardless of how they speak, regardless of how they dress, regardless of all the other issues that cloud human judgment. We must have open doors to hear what they have to say because we want them to be involved in the planning and the manifestation of the work that we will do in their benefit and for this country. We must ensure that they do not leave us the way they met us. We must develop them.

In this regard, we are already designing four important databases, Madam Speaker, a volunteer database touching and concerning the business of national service, we want to create a culture of volunteerism in the society. We move away from the case where as soon as someone asks someone to assist with something there is a price, you must pay something. The elderly in the community, she wants to move a gas tank from here to there, that will cost you something. We want to build a culture of volunteerism and support for each other in this civilized society. We want to put adults and professionals who are willing to help and to teach and those who are willing to give back in this volunteer database so that they can interface with the youth where necessary for all of their benefit.

We propose to have, very shortly, a national consultation on the business of national service. As I said, it is not new, Madam Speaker. We want to ensure that the national community is engaged in defining what national service should mean.
for Trinidad and Tobago. And once we have settled that and we propose to do so with great haste, we will then know what the concept is for certain and what are the things we must teach and imbibe in our youth so that they will benefit from that concept and the nation therefrom.

We have had recent consultation with the Red Cross Society, an international and local agency, that has a history of volunteerism a very important plank of their work and right now the technocrats at the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service are in contact with the local Red Cross team seeing how they do what they did in terms of volunteerism and their database and so on, so that we could benefit from it and not have to reinvent the wheel. We are also establishing a résumé employment database where the young people, the youth, will be able to upload their own résumés on the database. Not that we are a job creating agency but where we have opportunities that we could match the young people we must promptly do that.

But more importantly, Madam Speaker, that database, their résumés and their interests, will help us in the Ministry to determine, Madam Speaker, what with the areas of need, what are the deficiencies. Your interest is one thing but your readiness and preparedness is another. And when we see the gaps we will now direct the young people to our programmes or other programmes where they can improve those résumés and they can proceed to worthwhile living and contribution to Trinidad and Tobago. That is where we are heading.

An apprenticeship database where we expect to engage businesses, small, medium, large, sole proprietorships, in this database so that they will indicate their willingness to make whatever sacrifice they must make to take at least one or more young people, who would have come out of our programmes having received

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certain kinds of training and need on the job experience. So we establish this apprenticeship database, considering of course, that you have the formal small and micro enterprise sector of about 26,000. And I am advised that there about 27,000 unregistered informal small and micro enterprises around the place. We expect a burgeoning apprenticeship database to assist the youth in their development.

And, Madam Speaker, that may mean some tax concessions to those who are willing to make those sacrifices and it may mean some support for the youngsters on a stipend while they are in those institutions in their periods of apprenticeship. Those matters we will work out in greater detail going forward.

And, Madam Speaker, we propose to develop as well a mentorship database, not new, there is already one, but we want to expand it and improve it so that we will have more people who have indicated their willingness to act as mentors in the absence of that from their homes and from their communities. The State has to act to fill that parental role, maternal role, and in order to ensure the youngsters are properly mentored where and as necessary.

As I indicated earlier, Madam Speaker, we are not focused only on at-risk children. We are focused on all the children of the nation, Madam Speaker, because it is quite clear there are many who have done well academically but you know, you might have other issues that our programmes can add great value to. And we want to create opportunities and we want all of the children of the nation, all of the youth of the nation, to understand what we mean by and to live by the principles that they would learn in the context of national service, every one of them.

Madam Speaker, let me quickly demonstrate the design and function that we propose to undertake. At the very pinnacle of the Ministry we will have our
resident YDACs, the youth development activity centres, what they call the youth camps. We had those established back in 1964. We had about four of them around the country and one for the females in El Dorado.

And, Madam Speaker, in a time past, the UNC in Government whittled down those institutions but there is a call, a strong call from the young people of this country to reestablish these youth camps, and we are determined to do that. There are two in existence now, Madam Speaker, at Chatham and Persto Praesto and we are intend to develop those, modernize them, implant new skills to be thought therein, digitization included, and all of the modern skills that are required for development in this modern economy. We intend to develop them. At their highest intake they took about 120 residents; we want to take that to about 250. There is land available, there is opportunity available, and we want to revitalize them and let them loose with full force.

We propose, Madam Speaker, to build another two, one in the eastern part of the country for the youth in that region in the Wallerfield area and we propose to build one there. We want to build another one, Madam Speaker, or rebuild and reestablish one on the western peninsula in Chaguaramas and work is already afoot to get that going, so that the youth in that part and this part of the region will have the benefit of those centres as well.

Madam Speaker, the Government established an interministerial committee to look at the operations of the development of the apprenticeship centres—the so-called youth camps. And a very comprehensive look—that was shared by Minister Cudjoe at the time—and a very comprehensive study was taken of the youth camps. We are fully aware of its history, its value, its potential, and of course its problems, and we were intent on continuing our close observation of the terms of
this report issued by that committee and we will be guided by them.

Some of the challenges they identified was changing socioeconomic realities which impact those centres, gangs and drugs, et cetera, an increase in the number of social and vocational programmes competing for limited resources, higher stipends paid out at other training programmes, negative perception of the residential nature of the programme, stigmatization of the programme as a correctional, punitive institution, and obsolete technology and practices. Those were some of the challenges that were identified but the benefits that were identified far outweigh those, Madam Speaker, and we are determined to reestablish them for the benefit of this country and our youth in particular.

As I indicated, that there are two and we propose to build the others and money has been allocated in these measures in this budget in order to do that and the sum of $25 million was allocated, Madam Speaker, for the development of the Chaguaramas and the one at Wallerfield that I have discussed.

Around that, Madam Speaker, we have our youth activity centres. There are seven of them in the country, some of them under-utilized. The COVID experience has whittled down some of the work. We intend to reactivate them with full force. We intend as well, Madam Speaker, to establish four national service training institutions, three for males, one for females, at different locations around the country, so that, when we design the concept of national service and when we determine what are the ingredients, what we must teach the young people of this country in that context, those would be the institutions that would purvey this knowledge on an ongoing basis for the benefits that are quite, in my view, obvious.

We intend to make use of all—they fall under the Ministry of Community Development, yes—but we intend to make use of all of the community centres
around the country, all of the public spaces, whether it is the church hall, whether it is the school hall, whether it is the community centre. We anticipate, we vision, we want to have these effective and open from 8.00 in the morning until perhaps as late as 10.00 in the evening under good management, because all of the programmes we intend to purvey in our residential programmes, we want to conduct them around the country, Madam Speaker, in non-residential settings, so that the children, the young people of the nation, could benefit from all that is on offer around Trinidad and Tobago.

12.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, we will tackle, alongside the technical training that we want to share in our residential programmes, and I had identified them a while ago, issues of literacy and remedial training in academics. So we anticipate, Madam Speaker, a very active constituency of youth across Trinidad and Tobago, keen, moving, learning, developing, for their own sake and for others.

Madam Speaker, we must refurbish some of these youth facilities, the two that I have spoken about and the other seven youth activity centres. We intend to refurbish them and money has been allocated in this budget in order to do that. Seven of them include, one at St. James, for St. James and Woodbrook; one at Basilon Street, serving north-east Port of Spain; Laventille, right not too far from my own constituency office; one in Malick, which serves the East-West Corridor; one in California, and one in Los Bajos.

Madam Speaker, the training programmes that we anticipate in our residential programmes and to be disseminated around the country, as I have said, will include and be led by agriculture, which is in keeping with the Government’s mandate for food and nutrition security and as part of the process of
diversification, we intend to focus very heavily on agriculture in our youth camps, so to speak, and we propose as well, to construct a farm school in the Moruga area. We have already established an agro-processing and light manufacturing industrial estate in that area. We want to establish not a full-fledged youth camp, but a farm school, to focus on modern skills that are required with the modern technologies to give a good—to put a good national effort forward, in the business of agriculture.

We want to focus as well, Madam Speaker, on the culinary sciences including, of course, food preparation, because many young people can find opportunities in this area, many can be self-employed. We want to focus on culture and the arts, pan making, pan tuning and all other aspects of national and even international culture. The music industry, a large cross section of the young people are interested in music and things around the music industry, and we have already begun the work in planning and organizing for this, and we look forward to that for them with great anticipation.

Madam Speaker, we intend to—as the Government has signalled by putting the piece for digitization and the digital transformation of Trinidad and Tobago into the Ministry of Public Administration. When you talk digitization, when you talk the digital platform, you are really talking about youth. One of my colleagues on the other side opined that he did not see enough about youth in this budget. Well, a blind man would not see but everything in this budget is about youth, Madam Speaker, and in that digital work, we anticipate the youth will learn the modern skills. I conducted my election campaign recently, I did six of them before. What was different on this occasion is that we had three young people in it with us on this occasion. One was a videographer, the other one was a social media specialist and the other one was a graphic designer. Three new kinds of skills,
which we brought to bear in our campaign, and it had significant impact in our reach, hence the reason why we won so comprehensively, [Desk thumping] and all of my other colleagues made use of these facilities, and we beat them in the east, north, west and south.

The training programmes that we want to offer, Madam Speaker, will include welding—these were already taught in the youth camps where we intend to accentuate them—and the building trades including carpentry, beauty culture, dressmaking and designing, pipe fitting and fabrication, and of course, electrical installation, among many others, and academics.

One of the reasons why we will be focusing on academics in all of our training programmes, residential and non-residential, is because we are beginning to detect, Madam Speaker, surprisingly perhaps, that there are a number of young people who come out into the world of work but they are not as numerate and as literate as they should be. And we also recognize, Madam Speaker, that typically in the youth camps, they took them through level one in their first year and level two in their tech-voc and their skill acquisition training. But when it comes to level four to become the craftsman, or a master craftsman, or technician, and then master craftsman, you need to have some kind of academic background and if you do not, typically you have five O levels, including math and English, you are not going to get to those levels. We want to take the youth all the way up and as a result, we are committed to putting, alongside all of what we do, academic opportunities, academic training, so that they—if they come in with one pass, or none, or two or three, we can take them to the level that they ought to go and I understand that very, very well, [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker. And alongside the technical training that we propose, as I already alluded to, concepts of volunteerism, life

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skills, entrepreneurship, employability, activism, patriotism, manhood, womanhood, general character development, family life, leadership, citizenship, financial literacy.

I have young professionals around me all of the time, I am amazed. Twenty-seven years, 28 years, I am talking about having come out of university and some basic issues of financial literacy, they do not have and we see this therefore as very important, so that they can make the right decision and get off rather early, Madam Speaker, to their own development.

All of these softer but necessary skills that I have just listed will be infused into all of the programmes we will be offering around Trinidad and Tobago in the platform that we are doing. And, Madam Speaker, in addition to our residential and non-residential training opportunities and programmes, we intend to conduct training online as well from this Ministry so that those who cannot present themselves physically—I am talking about post-COVID—can still participate and benefit from our training modules, our training programmes to their own advancement. It means, therefore, if you have a job and you finish at 11.00 in the night, you can still go home, spend two hours on your laptop or your computer, get into one of the modules and acquire the credits going forward and graduate, ultimately, with the skill that we intend to purvey. In addition to all of that, Madam Speaker, we want to congratulate and thank the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, who has been managing very, very positively and very successfully our CCC Programme, Civilian Conservation Corps; the MiLAT Programme, that is the Military-Led Academic Training; and the MYPART Programme, Military-Led Youth Programme of Apprenticeship and Reorientation.

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Madam Speaker, I congratulate them very sincerely because over the years—and these programmes have not come into the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. But over the years, the ladies and gentlemen of the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force and some of their retired personnel have been doing a magnificent job with our youth between the ages of 18 and 25 years. They focus largely on marginalized youth and they understood the challenges of those but as I am saying to you, Madam Speaker, I want us to move away from the issue of at-risk and marginalized, and make some of these opportunities available across the board. Where those concepts are relevant, we will treat with them accordingly.

They, in the CCC programme, they run that for about six months and it has been, as I said, very, very successful. Within the last fiscal year, 1,600 participants in two cohorts were registered for the various programmes in the eight regions; 15 per cent of the graduates have opened their own businesses from the tracer studies; 77 per cent employment—sorry, 77 per cent employment rate of the programmes graduate was had; over 500 former trainees went into the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force as sworn personnel, and 33 per cent of the graduates have pursued further tertiary education opportunities.

Madam Speaker, similar successes in the MiLAT Programme, 103 cadets were enrolled with a 61 per cent graduation rate; 60 per cent of them received the full CXC certificate; 100 per cent of them attaining at least two CSEC passing grades; 70 per cent of all the graduates are employed, and the programme boasts of having over 150 successful transitions into the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force.
So, I think, Madam Speaker, it is quite clear that the MYPART Programme, carrying on the academic and pre-technical vocational training to level two, very, very, very successful, and those programmes will continue within the ambit of this Ministry. Only last week, I had the good opportunity to meet with the leaders at the NESC and of course, the MIC, the National Training Agency, YTEPP and others, in order to rationalize what we all offer because as you saw from the inter-ministerial report, there is competition for what is being done by one agency and the next. We intend to rationalize that for the benefit of efficiency and efficacy, and we have begun that work and it will continue to all of our benefit.

We have as well, as I indicated, the youth policy and we have a legislative framework that we use and of course, we are taking a strategic approach to this business of youth development and national service. The guiding philosophy, as I indicated earlier, is not a national security one, not an at-risk one but it is a rights-based approach and participation by the youth from planning stages in whatever we want to do, and that is because we see the youth and that 60 per cent that I identified as a national treasure, a national asset to be unleashed on and for the benefit of the national community. We are aiming at empowering our youth so that they can access opportunities to reach their full potential and to develop, participate and contribute to national development as responsible citizens with the aim of creating a peaceful, prosperous, and caring Trinidad and Tobago. The values that we intend to imbibe in them, the values that we intend to share with them will turn around respect and tolerance, equity, gender justice, good governance—they will understand that too—active participation, as I said earlier, activism, empowerment, honesty, very, very important, and a sense of justice. [Desk thumping]
I learnt recently that they say Japan is one of the safest places to lose something. When you lose something in Japan, you have a 93 per cent—an international report said—of finding it. I would like to see Trinidad and Tobago get to that and to surpass it. It might require some political work, it might require us winning 41 seats, but I look forward to that, Madam Speaker. And our major strategies include, developing the National Youth Policy, as I explained; establishment of the national and district youth councils; national youth service programmes, as I already explained; strategic implementation plan for the youth; collaborative inter-department programmes with the youth division, with NEDCO, which I will come to later, and the department of micro development cooperation and the credit union; development of a business plan for each youth empowerment center, and development of a business plan for each youth facility.

12.45 p.m.

In short, Madam Speaker, we see youth everywhere: youth in tourism, youth in agriculture, youth in culture, youth in education, youth in digitization, youth everywhere. And, Madam Speaker, I propose to encourage the youth to establish a national youth forum using the online method, TV and the radio, so that they can let their voices be heard and known to the national community, a national youth debate. We intend to encourage youth activism and a multiplicity of youth exchange programmes with other countries, Madam Speaker. I have already begun discussing that with some of them for the post-COVID era.

Madam Speaker, time is closely creeping up on me, so I need to cut my way through this. I think by now, Madam Speaker, you have a reasonably good understanding of what we want to do. Madam Speaker, with all of the opportunities that we propose to make available, I want to say this—and this
comes from an experience that I had in talking to a young citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, who made very good in this world. She started out at the Morvant Anglican School, went to Success Laventille Secondary, got the President’s Gold Medal there—that time it was composite school—in the composite division, went on to Bishop Anstey. She got the President’s Medal there at CAPE, and in keeping with good government policy, Madam Speaker, she entered the university and she got herself a First Class Honours Degree. The Government’s policy was and remains if you get a First Class Honours Degree, we will take you through your Masters and to PhD at the State’s expense. She did exactly that. Today she is a lecturer at the University of London and another university in England, holder of a PhD in Developmental Economics.

In my conversation with her, recently, on the business of my Ministry, she told me there are three elements that she considers—and I agreed with her altogether—critical in the development of the youth. One, good government policy as I have just explained. The PNM’s education policy has been good and sound and has served this country very well for many, many years, and we intend to continue that. It is that policy that gave that young lady that opportunity.

The second question is the family and the concept of taking a village to raise a child. She may not have had her parents who could have done all for her, but other people in the community chimed in and they supported her. So she considers that to be extremely important and, of course, the very important personal drive and ambition, the desire of the individual to do well and to prosper. And, therefore, we intend to undergird all of what we do. We will execute good, sound government policy, Madam Speaker, and in the two minutes—and, Madam Speaker, I wanted to say some of the good things that are happening in the
constituency of Laventille West, all the paving that is taking place, all the
development that is taking place, but I will have to content myself with dealing
with that for another time. Madam Speaker, I thank you. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Barry Padarath (Princes Town): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the
opportunity to contribute in this year’s annual budget debate. Madam Speaker, I
want to also take this opportunity to congratulate the Leader of the Opposition, the
Member for Siparia, for a comprehensive contribution she made in response to the
Government’s presentation via the Minister of Finance. [Desk thumping] Madam
Speaker, after coming from the contribution from the oldest Minister of youth in
the Commonwealth, the Minister gave [Desk thumping] the words “forever young”
a whole new meaning, but it really was the Member for Siparia who, on this side of
the House, has brought in the two youngest Members of Parliament in the Twelfth
Parliament, who we heard earlier today in the persons of the Member for
Barataria/San Juan who I congratulate, as well as the Member for Chaguanas East.
[Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, after listening to the contribution of the Member
for Laventille West, it really reminded me of one of David Rudder’s songs, which
is, “This is not a fete in here, it is madness”. You see, Madam Speaker, these were
two young MPs that presented this morning, the youngest Members of Parliament
in the Twelfth Parliament, and the contribution by the Member for Laventille West
was an attempt to scandalize, deride and put derogatory remarks against those
Members. But we on this side, through the Member for Siparia, we lift up young
people in this country, and it was my hope that the Member for Laventille West,
who is the Minister of Youth Development and National Service would have done
that, but he has failed—

Mr. Al-Rawi: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Orders 48(4), 48(6), please.
Madam Speaker: I overrule. Please continue. [Desk thumping]

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I want to say in response to the Member for Laventille West, we only hope that the Prime Minister would not have to scrape him out of the Waterfront once more [Desk thumping] and he will turn up for work as the young people will be depending on him and this Ministry. Madam Speaker, the budget theme indicated by the Minister of Finance is Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation but, Madam Speaker, it was more like disconnect, switch off, crash and burn the economy for no growth and no innovation. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, in using a bit of “young people language” and terminology, there is now a social media platform call TikTok, and TikTok essentially reminded me a lot of what the Member for Laventille West had to say, a good song and dance but a complete facade, a good song and dance, but actually no results, no tangible measurable deliverables in terms of how it is going to impact on the quality of lives of young people in this country. You see, Madam Speaker, while the big boys and “sawatees” in big businesses and arenas are lauding the budget in some places, it is because it is “a big people party” up in here. [Desk thumping] As the Prime Minister said the rich will get richer and, Madam Speaker, that is exactly what we heard via the Member for Diego Martin North/East.

Madam Speaker, I have had the pleasure of sitting in the Eleventh Parliament and a lot of the policies, programmes and prescriptions indicated by the Member for Diego Martin North/East were nothing new when we heard it on budget day. Madam Speaker, if the population forgot or by change you forgot, I would like to remind this House of some of those measures. Madam Speaker, it was this very Minister of Finance, in the PNM’s first budget presentation in 2015,
that announced the Graduate Trainee Programme for young people. Madam Speaker, we say to you it was not COVID that crashed the economy, it was the PNM. [Desk thumping] You see that Graduate Trainee Programme failed in year one, it failed in year two, it failed in year three, it failed in year four, it failed in year five. COVID did not cause the economy to crash, PNM incompetence did. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, the manifesto promises. The manifesto promises of this administration, and I would like to go into some of those, Madam Speaker, of what were some of those manifesto promises. Madam Speaker, in 2015, we were told that under the youth development portfolio we will see:

“Taking Early Action to Prevent Crime

The PNM will tackle Youth Criminality head-on through the implementation of preventative actions that take into account the broad range of underlying personal (low attainment, problematic behaviour, bullying), parenting (inconsistent parenting, poor mental health, domestic violence) and family (socioeconomic stress, poor neighbourhood conditions)…”

Madam Speaker, year one to year six, and none of this has been achieved. Madam Speaker:

- “Intensify environmental awareness programmes among our children and youth, within our schools and in our villages and rural communities to promote an understanding of the central role of the environment in securing our survival and our future.”

Madam Speaker, five years have passed and none of this has been delivered. Madam Speaker, 2015, PNM Manifesto:

- “Promote agriculture entrepreneurship particularly among rural youth
as a key element of socioeconomic development in rural communities.”

Madam Speaker, if this sounds familiar to you, I think those were one of the lines that the Member for Laventille West ended his contribution with. But do you know, Madam Speaker, this is not from *PNM Manifesto 2020*, this is from *PNM Manifesto 2015*. So when we say to you it was not COVID that crashed the economy, it was PNM incompetence, this is a clear illustration of that, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, when I first became a Member of Parliament in 2015, I called for the establishment of the sex offenders registry, and it was something that I raised continuously throughout my stay in the Eleventh Parliament. I raised questions, I raised Motions and working across the aisle with the Member for San Fernando West and others, I am very happy that this was one of the measures that we were able to achieve in the Eleventh Parliament. However, Madam Speaker, as it relates to young people, there are a number of issues that the Minister of Youth Development and National Service failed to address. The Minister failed to address the issues that affect the reformation of the Children’s Authority. We have not been able to hear about what is going to be the policy measures in terms of going forward with respect to the challenges at the children’s homes.

Madam Speaker, one of the things that I have been advocating for and I hope that will be entertained is the issue of parental responsibility legislation. This is one area that I think will contribute greatly towards youth development in Trinidad and Tobago. We have seen the challenges with respect to bullying in the schools. We have seen the challenges with failed policies. The Member for Laventille West, speaking about the youth policy, failed to indicate that this is a youth policy that the PNM had introduced through several administrations that has yet to get off the
ground. Madam Speaker, it was my sincere hope that the Member for Laventille West would have really raised some of these issues, but he was not able to do so.

Madam Speaker, I turn to the issue of the PNM Manifesto in terms of youth development for the 2020 general election manifesto. They indicated that they would:

- “Create a system where the intellectual property rights of our Youth are developed and respected.”

We heard a lot with respect to digitalization, and one would have thought that it would have gone hand-in-hand with respect to intellectual property rights as advocated in their manifesto 2020. But, once more, another clear illustration of the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, and we will see a lot more of that happening as I go into the area of digitalization.

- “Develop of a comprehensive Youth Employment Policy…”

Again, we have seen massive job losses. We have seen very little economic activity as it relates to youth employment. The Minister of Youth Development and National Service failed to give us a clear appreciation of what were the targets, what were the figures in terms of youth unemployment. Madam Speaker, I suspect that those numbers are very high because of the industries that are mostly affected by the downturn in the economy. But, Madam Speaker, this downturn in the economy did not just happen with COVID. The economy crashed under the People’s National Movement long before COVID, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, they indicated in 2020, and it was a repeat promise from 2015, that they would:

- “Devote special emphasis to the Rehabilitation of Young Offenders as
well as a proper support system to assist in their reintegration into society.”

Repeat, as my colleague from Barataria/San Juan reminded us earlier, PNM: promises never materialize. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, this announcement of a youth leadership development institute, one would have thought that you would have heard this coming really from the Member for Siparia, but the Member for Siparia does not only talk the talk, she walks the walk. Because you see in terms of youth leadership, she has placed some of the youngest Members of Parliament in the Twelfth Parliament, putting forward a new generation of leaders in Trinidad and Tobago.

[M.R. DEPUTY SPEAKER in the Chair]

So she walks the walk, unlike the People’s National Movement [Desk thumping] where once more, they come, they announce youth leadership development institute. Absolutely no mention of it in the budget, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker:

- “Develop an annual Youth Expo and special Radio and Television programmes to allow youth to discuss the issues which affect them and focus on youth upliftment.”

Once more, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you peruse the yellow books and you go through the revenues and the expenditure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, even when you look at the Development Fund or you turn to the Social Sector Investment Programme or the PSIP, one would have thought that these were initiatives that would push young people forward in terms of job creation but more importantly, in terms of giving them an opportunity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to develop their skills that are necessary to compete in the global environment that we find ourselves in today.
Mr. Deputy Speaker, they indicated that they will:

- “Encourage young people to be more politically minded and provide opportunities and facilities for dialogue on youth issues.”

Again, one would have thought that they would have led by example. The Member for Laventille West is seen in a famous video, instead of teaching children by putting laptops in their hands, they put cocoyea brooms and challenge them to sweeping challenges. Those are the only things they challenge them to do. They do not challenge their minds, and that is the stark contrast in difference between a government led by the Member for Siparia and a government led by the Member for Diego Martin West, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [Desk thumping] Mr. Deputy Speaker, they indicated that they will:

- “Create a forum for the youth arms of the national parties and independent young voices to debate and discuss issues.”

Again, another failed promise of this administration.

In the last few minutes of the contribution for the Member for Laventille West, the Minister of Youth Development and National Service, he hurriedly indicated that they will:

- “Provide youth facilities in villages and regions of Trinidad and Tobago that will allow positive recreation and healthy life styles among the young, so as to give vulnerable youth a safe haven to socialise, while receiving coaching, counselling and acquiring information on civic responsibility.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, once more, copy and paste directly out of the manifesto from 2015, packed into the manifesto of 2020.

You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, one young man sent me a message as I sat
there and, he said, the irony that the Minister of Youth Development and National Service is boasting about a job matching programme after the largest employer in Trinidad and Tobago announces—and the largest employer being our public service—that they are engaging in a freezing of all positions in the public service, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Yet the Minister of Youth Development and National Service comes to talk about a job matching programme. Where was that Minister when the Cabinet decided to freeze all the public service positions?

You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I remember as a young man, I came into the public service at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at that time, as a young diplomat starting off there. What would happen to those persons who specialize in particular areas like foreign policy, like international relations that depend on these careers in the public service, what will happen with them? Where was the Minister of Youth Development and National Service when this policy was taken in the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago that will stymie the careers of many young people in our country?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to turn to an area that the Minister of Finance spoke a lot about, and he focused a lot on the issue of digitalization, and I want to deal with digitalization in the context of how it will assist young people, but how the announcements that have been made have been made in a vacuum, so much so that recently one of the biggest critics of the Member for Laventille West, one Donna Hadad—Diane Hadad, sorry, not Donna Hadad. That was the mistake the Member made after he got scolded from Diane Hadad, when she indicated that the budget is completely visionless.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I remember about two years ago I came to this House and I indicated what were the positions that were put forward by senior
economists, business persons, heads of chambers in Trinidad and Tobago. Instead of taking the message, the Member for Diego Martin North-East aimed his guns at the messengers, and this has always been the position of this Government. Instead of listening to the business community, the Chambers of Commerce, people who have a vested interest in the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, instead of listening to those people, what do they do? They train their guns at the messengers. And just a few days ago, after getting a tongue-lashing from Diane Hadad, who described this budget as visionless, the Member for Laventille West had the opportunity to indicate how digitalization would affect young people in terms of job creation, in terms of the creation of small and medium enterprise business development, but also developing a national thrust towards the utilization of digitalization in the fields of ICTs, in the fields of connectivity and more focus on hardware and software production, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 2018 and 2019, the Parliament was told via the budget presentation by the Minister of Finance, that we would see a greater investment in ICTs. It was like déjà vu all over again, when we heard the hon. Minister of Finance read the budget a few days ago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had the opportunity, I was not a Member of Parliament then, but I had the opportunity of being around the Parliament for a number of years having worked in the public service, but also having been an advisor to the Prime Minister, but also at one point in time having worked in the parliamentary aspect in the Office of the Leader of the Opposition. And when I heard the Minister of Finance a few days ago, it was like déjà vu because these were old Manning prescriptions. These were prescriptions that the same Member for Diego Martin North-East and the same Member for Diego Martin West stood in this very House and criticized and
lambasted [Desk thumping] and said that there was no hope.

The same Member for Arima who sits there was a part of a Manning administration that criticized their own Members, their own Prime Minister, their own Ministers of Finance for failed visionless policies. [Desk thumping] But what do we have today? [Desk thumping] What do we have today? We have persons sitting in positions, sitting in a Cabinet, who are saying today is today and yesterday is yesterday. So we must forget what they have said about property tax, we must forget what they have said about ICTs, we must forget about the past. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is often said those who have forgotten the past are doomed to repeat it [Desk thumping] and history has a way of coming full circle, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And, therefore, when as Members of Parliament we were asked for immediate responses to the budget, I could not help but feel a sense of déjà vu because these are the very failed prescriptions and announcements coming from a recycled Manning administration.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, they want us on the other side to believe that they are different. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, having been described as “visionless” by several of the Chambers of Commerce in this country, by several business heads, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have not taken young people down a path that is different from where we were under old Manning regime. What they have done, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is used the TikTok approach which is to pretty much change buzzwords. So instead of listening to information technology and ICTs, what we hear today is digitalization.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this was the very same Minister of Finance that told us last year that the business will be booming because they will invest in broadband throughout the country. Then we saw half of the Cabinet led by the Member for
Laventille West on a bus riding from San Fernando to Port of Spain, and that was broadband connectivity PNM-style throughout the country. Then we were told by the Minister of Finance from 2015, that they will establish these call centres and they will outsource business operations throughout the country so that these business operations centres will be able to access, not only the Caribbean, but the Latin American economies. Not one word this year about what has happened with that initiative about what mechanisms have been put in place for young people to achieve these business operation centres in terms of bringing in foreign direct investment, but also at the same time stimulating the local economy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I ask, from those programmes, what were the measurable deliverables? Today, how many new jobs for young people were created in information technology? How many investments were there in research and development? It was a Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration between 2010 to 2015, that told us that the forward thinking in terms of how we will be able to bring in foreign direct investment apart from the energy sector and the manufacturing sector was through foreign direct investments via research and development.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at the Latin American countries and you look at the top 10 countries in terms of growth in the economy, at least 5 per cent of that growth, nationally, has to do with research and development, and research and development would have impacted tremendously on young people. And that is why then Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar indicated to the population, she said that we will look at utilizing the East-West Corridor by establishing growth poles. So research and development would have now become an area of expertise via institutionalizing research and development through The

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University of the West Indies and through COSTAATT. That was the way forward, and the Government will work hand-in-hand with UWI and COSTAATT to invest in young people by putting in economic incentives, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that is how you would have been able to get it done.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, so today when we tell you that it is not COVID that crashed the economy, that it is PNM incompetence, we can tell you why we say that, because we gave them the recipe, we gave them the prescription in terms of how it should have been done. Mr. Deputy Speaker, all we heard is how to cut cloth from the Member for Laventille West. That is all we heard about today. You heard about no sense of where digitalization will help young people via research and development, and this is coming from a Cabinet Minister. It is such a shame, a blatant shame, when a Minister can come and stand up and not be able to say how the investments in digitalization will work in terms of research and development, in terms of information technology, in terms of data-driven business development operations. [Desk thumping] That is the type of language that you need from a Minister of Youth Development and National Service who will thrust young people towards a digital economy. Instead you have a geriatric Minister whose ideas, thought processes and policy are older than he is. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will move on today because there is another area that I would like to focus on.

The hon. Minister of Finance told us in the 2015 budget presentation—2015/2016—and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to tell the Minister and the Member for Diego Martin North/East, beating the same dead old horse is not going to give you another or a different result. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you listen to the language presented by the Minister of Finance and all Ministers who have spoken so far, it is to come, it is expected. It is like an attraction. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in
local parlance, we have a saying in Trinidad and Tobago, they say, “While the grass is growing, the horse is starving”, and that is what you have happening in Trinidad and Tobago.

So the Member for Diego Martin North/East told us from 2015 to 2020, first, we were running on fumes. Then we were told that things were hard, tighten your belt. “De only belt dem was tightening was seatbelt.” Then in 2016, he said clearly, I can see the rains have gone. Then he told us from there, we are turning, we are turning around. Then in 2020 he told us we are booming. Budget 2021, again, no clear pathway in terms of where we are going. It is like the blind leading the blind. Today is today and yesterday is yesterday, and that is the approach the Member for Diego Martin North/East and the Member for Diego Martin West are leading this Government and leading this Cabinet.

1.15 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is what the Member for Diego Martin North/East had to say in his very first budget presentation with respect to ICTs; the new buzzword being digitalization in the 2020/2021 budget. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this can be found on page 18 of the budget statement 2015/2016. The hon. Minister says:

“Madam Speaker, a first-world information technology network will need to be a critical part of the Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre. We will commence the process through the implementation of a national broadband network...”


“We cannot improve our productive capacity and create a vibrant and competitive economy without a nationwide high-speed broadband network -
2015, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, through you I would like to ask the Minister of Finance, having said this in 2015 that we cannot improve our productive capacity and create a vibrant and competitive economy, does the Minister of Finance then today feel five going into six years later that we have increased capacity, that we have increased productivity? Because certainly we have not increased anything as it relates to information technology, connectivity and ICTs. All we have done is probably increased your vocabulary by including the word “digitalization” after utilizing “ICTs” and “information technology” ad nauseam for the past five to six years.

The Minister says:

“We will continue to collaborate with the World Bank Group to widen our broadband infrastructure as well as to eliminate the risk of having international connection in only one station.”

You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when the Member for Siparia was Prime Minister of this country it was the same World Bank report that informed the World Economic Forum that it was the best place for a girl child to be born. Yesterday we celebrated the International Day of the Girl Child and we were the third, ranked as the third country in the world for best place for a girl child to be born. And, you know, part of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was because of the thrust that we had made in terms of putting laptops in the hands of not only boy children but also girl children, giving them the opportunity of education, but also investing in technology.

Here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance in 2015 speaks about the...
World Bank, that they will work and collaborate with the World Bank. This is the same World Bank report that told you, in 2017 and 2018 that the lack of technology and the use of technology across the public service is what is stymieing our growth and our competitiveness as it relates to our young people. Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, and in a few minutes I will show you that as it relates to the Auditor General’s Report. Mr. Deputy Speaker, teaching old dogs new tricks, that is pretty much summing up the contribution and the budget presentation made by the Member for Diego Martin North/East, because again, all the Member sought to do was introduce the word “digitalization”, but failing to give us a comprehensive measurable report of what has occurred in terms of the investments that Government promised since 2015 in terms of the area of information technology, call centres, business operation centres.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to turn to the issue of the Auditor General Report. You know, to my friends and colleagues in the media, this is something that I raised two budgets ago, and I only saw one, Asha Javeed from the Express raised this a few weeks ago, but it was something I raised in the House two budgets ago, because the Auditor General has been saying the very same thing in budget 2017—in the reports, sorry, 2017, 2018 and 2019. It was nothing new. So sometimes members of the media get it a little bit late, but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is what the Auditor General Report had to say as it relates to the Government and digitalization and transformation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you turn to page 79 of the Auditor General Report for the year 1st October, 2018 to the 30th September, 2019, this is what the Auditor General has said, and it is a repeat, as I have indicated, from 2017, 2018, 2019,
with a bit of variation in terms of the language, under IT Assessment at Ministries and Departments:

“The absence of the aforementioned information can result in improper planning, uninformed decisions, sub-optimal use of resources, and improper”—staffing.

It also says:

“An IT governance framework, for example, COBIT or ITIL, was not adopted by”—any of the Ministries and there is a lack of cohesion, a lack of connectivity and a lack of policy prescription in these Ministries and state enterprises.

It also says:

“Ministries and Departments continued to operate in silos which resulted in duplication of effort and lack of synergy.”

It appears that there is no cohesion across the public service.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Diego Martin North/East tells us a few days ago when he presented the budget that we are going to go through the period of digitalization, they have now paired the Ministry of Public Administration with digitalization where they are going to digitalize records, and so on, in the public service. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Auditor General tells us 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, the problems and these are the Ministries that the Auditor General identifies. The Auditor General every year identifies the Ministry of Public Administration. The Auditor General every year identifies the Ministry of Finance. The Auditor General every year identifies the Office of the Attorney General. The Auditor General every year identifies the Office of the Prime Minister. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is not a new problem, this is a problem that has existed, one might say across administrations,
but this is a problem that was exacerbated by this administration, and the Auditor General has been telling them since 2016, “You need to fix it”, and they have done nothing in the past four to five years. So what difference is it going to have this time around?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister, you know, he excitedly proclaimed that there was going to be this digital economy, and the Minister told us that he was going to bring modern technological programmes to ensure that things are done in a more efficient and comprehensive manner. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to make a few observations with respect to the Minister’s pronouncements, and the Minister’s pronouncements indicated that this would be a better quality of life for everyone, but in the hands of an administration that has failed to implement 70 per cent of its promises, we should not be confident in what the Minister said. We could expect the Minister to repeat digitalization every year, but Mr. Deputy Speaker, the 8 million that was allocated to telecommunications companies for the provision of broadband Wi-Fi services along the Brian Lara Promenade and elsewhere, where did that go to?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am seeing an allocation today for the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service under the Accelerator Programme which is a business development programme. Again, the Minister and Member for Laventille West gave us a long song and dance, sought to insult the Member for Barataria/San Juan instead of telling us what his Ministry was doing with respect to the Accelerator Programme. He ran out of time that the hon Minister could not explain what this $3.8 million was going to be doing. You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at NEDCO which now falls under the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, formerly it used to be under the Ministry of
Labour and Small Enterprise Development; it is now shifted to Youth Development, but I looked at the allocation when it was under the Ministry of Labour. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in an environment where young people are looking for jobs where they are telling young people, “Start up a business, we are giving you these incentives, especially as it relates to if you are going into selling computers and cell phones, and so on, that you have an opportunity because you are going to get a tax holiday and you are going to get a tax break.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at their very own figures in the revenue of expenditure, do you know under this Accelerator Programme, this NEDCO loan programme, how much money was spent, $108,000 in a financial year. Tell me, how many young people benefited from this? How many small businesses developed from this programme? And in the current economic climate that we have right now where businesses are closing down, how many businesses are now going to benefit from this same allocation? So you allocated $3 million last year, you added 800,000 to the allocation this year, saying it is now going to be $3.8 million, how many young people are going to benefit from that under this new Ministry? But juxtapose that against, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a situation where the Auditor General is telling us, and everybody in the business sector is telling us that Trinidad and Tobago has moved from when Kamla Persad-Bissessar was Prime Minister to the ease of doing business being ranked at 61 to where we are today under a People’s National Movement administration at 105. That is where they have taken us.

So you are telling us, young people will be able to benefit from these loans, that young people will be able to benefit from the tax holiday, that young people will be able to benefit from this stock exchange programme that you are now
instituting, but how will they benefit when you have made the ease of doing business so difficult, that we have moved from 61 to 105? [Desk thumping] Mr. Deputy Speaker, so while the grass is growing the horse is starving.

I remember last year the Minister of Trade and Industry—Lord bless her soul, she probably means well. You know, I know the Member for Oropouche East tells us that is the Minister of chewing gum, “bubble gum”, because that is the only achievement that the Minister can boast of. But when the Minister comes to this House and tells us year after year, I remember her exact words were that we were working on improving the e-commerce, that we were improving the electronic window, that we were going to be improving and working alongside the Registrar General’s Department. Those were the exact words of the Minister, and that when she comes to report in this year’s budget, meaning 2021, that she will be able to tell us that we moved to a better position. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I may pre-empt the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry but it is certainly not news that she will be coming and beat her chest about proudly today, because instead of doing better they have done worse, [Desk thumping] and that is the hallmark of this PNM administration. That is their achievement.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I heard the hon. Member for Laventille West speak about the establishment of a farm school for Moruga, $1 million allocation; a youth development project formation, $5 million; the construction of the Salvation Army for 12 million. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is the same administration that left the Moruga agro-processing facility abandoned for five years—five years they abandoned that facility in Moruga, but today the Minister of Youth Development comes to tell us they will establish a farm school for Moruga. So you have only now, having lost the constituency of Moruga/Tableland come once more to add

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Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like for a few minutes to turn to the issues affecting the constituency of Princes Town. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I first became an MP one of the challenges that we had was the Princes Town Presbyterian No. 1 School. Together with the Member for Oropouche East, I led a protest in front of the Parliament when we were at the waterfront where the children from that school, the PTA, the teachers from Ramai Trace Hindu School, Princes Town Presbyterian No. 1, Parvati Girls’ and Shiva Boys’, that they have abandoned the education system, but more so they have abandoned schools that fall in Opposition territories. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the children of Trinidad and Tobago matter, not just the children of one particular geographical area. [Desk thumping] The Member for Barataria/San Juan told us today in the Minister of Education’s own constituency, they come lining up outside our constituency offices.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the day the budget was read I met the Minister of Education in the line collecting the yellow books and I said, “Minister, I know this may not be the most appropriate place because these books are very heavy and I see you have them in hands, but can you please tell me what is happening with the Princes Town Presbyterian No. 1 School?” Her grand response to me was, “Well, you really might not want to hear what I have to tell you”, and that is the approach. Minister Anthony Garcia, as he was then, told me in 2016 that the Princes Town Presbyterian No. 1 School was not a priority of this Government. He told me the
Prime Minister said that in the Cabinet. He had a meeting with myself and the PTA and he told us, “This school is not a priority of the Government.”

This school houses over 800 students, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and despite all of the challenges where that school is on a shift system, they had some of the best results coming out of this year’s SEA. [Desk thumping] But that is the spite and the malice that they have for Opposition constituencies and for the people of Princes Town and Oropouche and Siparia.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, you have two more minutes.

**Mr. B. Padarath:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would also like to turn to the issue of infrastructure, the Minister of Works and Transport wrote, and the same Member for Laventille West—I am sure every MP on this side of the House could remember when the Member for Laventille West was the Minister of Works and Transport; he got a little 10 days until they realize his incompetence level was so high that they removed him even from that Ministry. [Desk thumping] But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, he wrote a letter telling us to identify the roads that we needed paving, we sent that since 2015, Garth Road, Naparima/Mayaro Road. The Member for Naparima went and toured with the Minister, nothing, absolutely nothing was delivered in year one, year two, year three, year four, year five, and we know nothing will be delivered in year six, seven, eight, nine and 10. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it will take an administration—and sometimes I often say, it takes a little bit longer and the pain needs to be a little bit harsher for the population to open their eyes clearly. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, surely as night follows here I am certain, as I will not be standing here if I did not believe in my own child’s future that the future of Trinidad and Tobago rests in an administration
headed by the Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar who continues to be the only Prime Minister that put people first. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are not about mamaguuy, [Desk thumping] we are not about “ole” talk, we are about delivery, we are about performance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And today I am very happy to be able to pay tribute to the best Prime Minister Trinidad and Tobago has ever seen in terms of what she has been able to do for children, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Member. I will now recognize the hon. Member for Tobago East. [Desk thumping]

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to contribute to this debate. Mr. Deputy, as I start permit me to congratulate the hon. Minister of Finance, as well as the Minister of Planning and Development for such a well-crafted budget statement. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the budget is one that will stimulate growth and development and I am proud to be a part of this team. Mr. Deputy Speaker, permit me also to say thank you to the people of Tobago and the people of Tobago East for allowing me the opportunity to once again represent them and to be their voice and their face in the Parliament. I would also like to thank the hon. Prime Minister for giving me the opportunity to serve alongside him and to support our nation’s most vulnerable.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as we continue to navigate the turbulent tides brought upon our shores by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government is prepared to widen the support for the vulnerable by focusing on policy initiatives which will see great private sector and individual partnership in the provision of services and accommodation. The Government is preparing a policy for philanthropy with
supportive strategies aimed at identifying tax concessions for those organizations and individuals who support children’s homes and families in need, provide safe accommodation for women and children. Other incentives to the private sector for work-at-home options for single parents among others. This policy strategy will see online virtual systems for the private sector and individuals to offer and register their support. For this new fiscal year, despite the constraints that have emerged during the pandemic, the Office of the Prime Minister expects to continue on this path. Most importantly, however, over this new year the Office of the Prime Minister will mobilize its partner so that all of the expected projects will be implemented efficiently, effectively and timely, utilizing the digital world as much as possible.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as it relates to gender, research has shown that gender inequality propels intergenerational poverty, limits human potential and consequently stymies development. The national commitment to utilize a much more human-centred approach to development and to leave no one behind means that discrimination against women and men, girls and boys based on gender will not be tolerated. This is the essence of the national policy on gender development which is being implemented. Focusing on the various themes of the policy, the Office of the Prime Minister is reviewing the policy in order to assess the advancement made in its implementation with a view to ramping up and supporting key actors in the implementation of these thematic areas which would see an increase in the number of support system for women involved in food production, trade, information technology and decision-making to name a few.

To improve the local situation of our women, men, boys and girl and in keeping with the Government’s international obligations, the Gender Affairs
Division will continue to:

1. Manage the implementation of the key strategies for gender development outlined in the policy action plan.
2. Mainstream gender by incorporating gender perspectives in all activities of Government and civil society;
3. Promote gender equality and equity through the promotion of the full and equal participation of men and women with consideration for their different needs, constraints, opportunities and priorities.
4. Work with civil society organizations and communities to promote gender and strong families.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to focus on domestic violence which continues unabated to plague our country because of the unequal power relations and the negative gender stereotypes we have consumed over the years and which continue to be perpetuated among our young people. Domestic violence has shown an increase in recent times with horrific crimes stemming from the poor and unequal power relations between men and women and boys and girls. In June, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Domestic Violence Act was amended to provide additional protection for those persons affected by domestic violence. Several key definitions were amended. The category of persons who can apply for protection orders were expanded to include children and other family members. The amendments make provision for emergency protection orders. As a Government we have tried to tackle the issue of domestic violence from all fronts. We have married legislation with programming and started improving on existing institutional frameworks which made it difficult for survivors to seek redress.

The Office of the Prime Minister worked with its partners, including the
police service and the UN agencies over the past fiscal year on several initiatives to reduce gender-based violence and domestic violence. These include gender-based violence outreaches. In 2019 the division partnered with key stakeholders to conduct gender-based outreaches utilizing the theatrical play performed by ICAN Production, titled, Shades of I-She: Every Woman’s Story, which was hosted in four communities and the women’s prison of Trinidad and Tobago. The UN Women Foundations Programme-Strengthening Prevention Approaches to Address Gender-Based Violence in the Caribbean programme targets youth between the ages of 13 to 24. The Government is of the view that the implementation of this programme at schools and facilities where young persons are engaged can change the culture of violence. To date a total of 27 persons from key Ministries, the Tobago House of Assembly and faith-based organizations were trained to be programme facilitators. To date several programmes have been conducted at the state-supported community residences and youth institutions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government addresses the limited number of safe spaces for victims of domestic violence and their dependents. Two domestic violence shelters were opened in June, 2020. The Government is working with civil society organizations aimed at offering support. Additionally, an intervention strategy to support women and adolescent girls residing in DV shelters, prison and detention centres, the OPM developed and distributed care packages for those individuals. An inter-ministerial committee to coordinate strategies that serve to reduce DV has been operationalized. The goal of this committee is to facilitate the effective implementation of the current and future strategies which seek to reduce domestic and gender-based violence. The committee comprises 18 persons representing key Government Ministries and agencies and civil society
organizations. The Office of the Prime Minister also continues to mainstream gender which is one of its main strands of work. Mainstreaming includes capacity building workshops, sensitization sessions and the establishment of gender focal points to champion sensitization and gender-based violence, gender equality and gender-responsive budgeting in their respective agencies. To date there are 103 gender focal points across Government Ministries and state agencies; 23 gender focal points represent Government Ministries and 80 gender focal points are from state agencies.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Central Registry on Domestic Violence was advanced in collaboration with the UN Population Fund and it is being expanded to treat with all forms of gender-based violence. Phase one entails the design of the software and training of end users which was concluded in August 2020. Additionally, the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 800-SAVE, continues to provide confidential listening and referral support to persons affected by such family violence. During the period of January 2019 to August 2020, a total of 11,298 calls were made to the hotline. An integrated information system is being implemented to manage the calls and data generated by this line with the support of the United Nation will feed into a machinery.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to take the opportunity to just speak to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. While we may do our best to implement policy to establish shelters, to amend laws, Mr. Deputy Speaker, unless the people of Trinidad and Tobago make a conscious decision at a personal level to do better and be better, they will never be able to overcome this challenge. So today while I present what we would have done, and I continue to present on what we will do in the future, I want to call on all of us as citizens to make a conscious decision to do
better and be better. The only way we will be able to address domestic violence and gender-based violence is if we look at ourselves closely first and foremost; look at what we do in our homes, and then when we look at what we do in our homes, look at how we socialize our boys and our girls in our communities.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it calls for all hands on deck, it is not just the work for the Government or for those who work in the vineyard as in terms of the NGOs, but for each and every individual, each and every citizen to make an effort to do what is right. We all crave and we all zealously guard our human rights, but at the same time we find it so easy to violate the rights of others.

1.45 p.m.

We all clamour for women to be respected and protected, and at the same time, those of us who make the noise for our women would be the ones on social media sharing a video of a young man being violated by a young woman on a bed. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it goes both ways. Respect and rights goes across the spectrum. [Desk thumping] It is not just about men, not just about women, it is about all of us doing what is right.

The Government is mindful that men are the main perpetrators of domestic violence and has increased the support for men via several programmes and collaborations. We must find ways for men to understand their role in the family and the rights of women and girls. The Office of the Prime Minister engages in several initiatives, including the barbershop initiative which targets males age 14 years and older and aims to create a setting for male to male discussions about behaviors, attitudes and negative gender stereotypes. The programme also identifies organizations which provide support and other services for men and boys. Nearly 500 students and adult men have participated in the barbershop. The
programme will continue because it is an important avenue for our men, and they are needed to be a part of the response.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we collaborated with the Ministry of National Security on the project for safeguarding and rescuing all humans from trafficking, SARAH. This programme targets men 18 years and older, intending to engage them in discussions surrounding sexual exploitation and other gender-related issues. Topics covered during the workshop include: techniques used by human traffickers, gender stereotypes and human trafficking, methods to protect against human traffickers, men as consumers, indicators and elements of human trafficking and men’s role in ending the demand. We collaborated on and will continue the workshops on rethinking masculinity, understanding gender equality as a means of ending family violence in the Caribbean.

Approximately 50 persons from civil society and other multisectoral organizations have already participated in these workshops. We designed and will continue the radio series, “SPEAK: A Conversation for Men”. This series is a six-week radio programme targeting the public on domestic violence using subject matter experts. In addition, we produced information and education material and video to provide information on support services available to men through the State, private sector and civil society.

In 2020, over 10,000 brochures were produced to share at community caravans organized by the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as we look towards 2021, we understand that 2021 has to become a very serious year for gender development. Our country cannot continue with such high incidences of gender-based and sexual violence. The
Government will continue on its path of mainstreaming gender, conducting gender sensitization and promoting the equal participation of men and women, provide safe spaces for victims of such gender-based violence, implement such policies that are necessary to improve the lives of women and their children, and focus on strategies that facilitate and support behavioural change among all of us to improve gender relations. We each have a responsibility to end all forms of family violence and in particular, domestic violence.

In fiscal 2021, the Office of the Prime Minister will finalize and implement the draft National Strategic Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence. This draft national strategy will be reviewed and finalized for implementation. This will become the key strategy for reducing gender-based violence in Trinidad and Tobago and will take a whole of government approach to family violence.

The nature of gender-based violence demands a participatory multisectoral approach to policy development which strengthens the State’s capacity to implement and adopt policies and programmes which support key civil society organizations to suit the current local context of GBV. We will continue to focus programmes, particularly the male-centred programmes, to change behaviour among persons who perpetuate domestic violence, and all other forms of gender-based violence. We will build and deliver on those programmes at all levels of communities and through various mediums which highlight various forms of family violence, and identify strategies to prevent such forms of violence. Every effort must be made to stop gender-based violence before it happens in our communities, and our communities must be brought to the point where they can support the intervention of the police and other first responders in the struggle to
end gender-based violence.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to mention the Spotlight Initiative. The Spotlight Initiative is a global multiyear partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, and the elimination of family violence. The overall goal of the Spotlight Initiative is to accelerate efforts towards the elimination of family violence. The Spotlight Initiative theme for the Caribbean focuses on family violence which includes domestic violence, intimate partner violence, corporal punishment, child abuse and all acts of aggression within families. The initiative supports and complements many of the projects emerging at the Office of the Prime Minister and the social sector stakeholders. The Office of the Prime Minister as co-chair of the steering committee has set up a structure to ensure the action plan to be implemented is fully supported by other participating agencies of Government and civil society organizations. This action plan is available for public viewing online.

Our response mechanisms must improve in 2021 among all key actors. Towards this end, the domestic violence hotline, 800-SAVE or 800-8273, which is critical in the fight against domestic violence, will expand and increase service delivery as we recognize the need for online counselling services. Government must increase places of safety and shelters. We will be establishing three additional domestic violence shelters for the provision of services and safe spaces for persons who are victims of domestic violence in north Trinidad.

We will devise a system to adequately partner with existing domestic violence shelters to ensure that victims and perpetrators are serviced. To this end, the Office of the Prime Minister has collected and is analyzing data with a view to provide a support for these privately managed facilities. As a country, we must
increase the representation of women in the decision-making levels of our society.

In commemoration of International Women’s Day, March 2021, the Office of the Prime Minister will launch two new female-centred projects. One, women in politics project. This initiative prepares and socializes women from across the political arena. It is aimed at raising women’s representation at all levels of our political system which will allow their increase representation and advocacy for gender equality issues.

Two, leadership for gender justice. This initiative targets women who are already active or aspiring to enter political or public leadership by providing an opportunity to develop and build on their leadership and governance capacities.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, while we implement all these measures, unless citizens make a conscious decision to let the change begin at the individual level, then we will continue to see the downward spiral in Trinidad and Tobago. It is not for us as leaders to cast blame, but for us as leaders to set the example at the individual level by doing our best to end violence in all its forms by your own actions, and at the society level, the community level, by encouraging those we encounter to socialize our children differently, for our boys and our girls to understand that rights belong to each and every one of us, and while we guard or protect our rights, that we must respect that along with those rights we have responsibilities.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on days when I feel a little bit down, it is the dreams and the aspirations and the hopes of little boys and girls that keep me motivated and help me to get up and face a new day. This morning I had the pleasure and the privilege and the honour to interact with young Coryn Clarke, a four-year-old author, a four-year-old beautiful, intelligent Trinidad girl, who would have paid a
courtesy visit to my office this morning. Miss Clarke represents what we all want to see in our children, for them to aspire, and for them to dream and for them to be able to achieve. But for that to happen we must create the environment to facilitate their growth and their development.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are several critical national policies which will support the work of the Office of the Prime Minister. These include the National Child Policy, the National Policy on Gender and Development, the Community Development Policy, the National Parenting Policy, and soon to be ready, the national family policy. The synergy envisioned and strategies outlined in these and other supporting policies will bring the behaviour change we so desire for our families, our children and our communities when pursued.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, despite the expansion of our child protection and development apparatus, children are still vulnerable to abuse in Trinidad and Tobago. In 2019, the report of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago noted that for that reporting period alone, over 4,000 cases of child abuse were reported. Of these reported cases, 54.4 per cent were females, while male clients accounted for 43.3 per cent. The highest instances of reports received across Trinidad and Tobago were cases of sexual abuse, that is 22.6 per cent; neglect, 20.6 per cent and physical abuse, 14.3 per cent. Moreover, reports of sexual abuse, neglect and physical abuse have consistently been the highest reported types of abuse and maltreatment received by the Authority over the past years of operation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the goal is to protect the rights and cater to the needs of children in Trinidad and Tobago, to ensure that these children attain their fullest potential. The Office of the Prime Minister, working in collaboration with other
key agencies for the care and protection of our children, achieved several milestones in developing and reinforcing the national child protection and well-being framework and machinery. These included: the amendment of the suite of children’s legislation to give further direction and clarification on the rights of children in need of care and protection and rehabilitation; a payment per child system for every child accommodated at a children’s community residence; additional provisions for medical and psychological care, and refunds for 50 per cent of the cost for utilities at these residences. Refunds paid over the last fiscal year for utilities totalled $67,953.21. Over the past fiscal year, 29 community residences received these payments amounting to $9,982,227.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Office of the Prime Minister has also trained thousands of sport coaches, teachers, bus drivers, psychologists, social workers and guidance counsellors on the rights of children and child abuse. We engaged over 80 schools to create child ambassadors, who in turn educated over 343,500 people nationwide on child rights and abuse.

Thousands of child-related resources have been developed and distributed nationally and online, such as, *My Book of Rights and Responsibilities*, *Reach Out: A Guide to Child Friendly Services* and the *Child Abuse Awareness Workbook*. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we initiated the children in disaster and emergency situations to ensure that a well-coordinated disaster and emergency response system is in place to protect children and facilities designed to care and protect them.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, while we would have done all of this and while we would have invested in the establishment of more facilities to protect our children, we recognize that there is not a fast enough downward trend in terms of the number of reports coming in, and it begs us to question, what does it say about us
Mr. Deputy Speaker, just as I would have urged all of us to be different, think different, do better in terms of gender-based violence, I would like to encourage us all as adults to really consider what we are doing to our nation’s children. I often say when I speak to the public that the seeds we sow into the lives of our children today, the fruits we will reap as a nation tomorrow. I have often urged us to sow good seeds because collectively, we want to reap good rewards from our children in the future. We have to do right by the boys and girls of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to quickly focus on the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. The Children’s Authority has also made significant headway in meeting its mandate. Some of the achievements include expansion of their human resources to meet the needs of children and family services at its operational centres.

Four regional assessment centres were opened, three in Trinidad and one in Tobago. Monitoring and licensing of children’s homes continue, and a total of 20 children’s homes have been licensed as residences for children. The Authority’s is working with the others to ensure that they become compliant according to the legislative guidelines, in the shortest possible period.

Three child support units were also established, which also led to an increase in staff from 58 in 2015, to 311, most of them being frontline workers required to improve service delivery and to support the operations of the Children Court.

With the need to support greater efforts to protect our greatest treasure, our children, the Office of the Prime Minister will continue to focus on projects that strengthen the national child protection machinery within the context of the social
development initiatives outlined by the Government to build our families and our communities to respond to the needs of our children.

The Office of the Prime Minister is also committed to continuing its implementation of projects that have had a positive impact on children and those who care for them. We will endeavour to maximize the use of digital communication to bring about positive behaviour change in adults towards children. We have commenced our design of animated messages and interactive activities for children and hope to launch these initiatives in the first quarter of fiscal 2021. These projects are supported with the help of UNICEF.

Considering the current context, the Office of the Prime Minister would aim to work even more closely with its partners towards a mutually beneficial end, that our nation’s children are happy, healthy and their rights are upheld and respected. Therefore, the following policies, projects and programmes will be prioritized this fiscal year. The implementation and communication plan for the National Child Policy will go before the Cabinet shortly. An interministerial civil society committee is proposed for steering the implementation of this policy. This committee will report to the Cabinet on the progress made. This will ensure the overall improvement in the well-being and holistic development of the nation’s children. Adherence to the policy which addresses the root causes of many of the social issues faced by our nation’s children and those who care for them is expected to assist the country economically and socially.

More opportunities will be created to support and encourage families to keep their children. Greater emphasis will be placed on foster care to ensure that children remain in families. Mr. Deputy Speaker, our administration, a few years ago, would have designated a Foster Care and Adoption Awareness Month. What
we recognize is that although we want people to adopt children and although there are persons who are willing to adopt, in some instances, we have children in homes who are eligible for adoption but because the parents are holding on to them, they do not have the opportunity to be adopted into a loving, stable family environment. I want to urge those parents in Trinidad and Tobago who have children in homes and who have no intention of removing that child from the home and returning that child to their birth family, to give that child the opportunity to benefit from a family environment, benefit from the love of a stable, nurturing family, by allowing that child to be adopted.

More so too, we have children in community residences. We are encouraging our families to come on board with us and to help us to create that family environment for them by fostering. We want to encourage citizens in Trinidad and Tobago to open up their hearts and their homes to children in need.

The national children’s registry would provide a more efficient and effective method of monitoring child development, specifically aimed at reducing child abuse, neglect and exclusion in Trinidad and Tobago. The national children’s registry will help service providers to quickly identify a vulnerable child with whom they have contact, and determine whether that child in receiving essential services, that is, education, primary health care, et cetera, to which he or she is entitled. It will also enable identification of needs, and early and effective action to address these needs by those providing a tool to identify who is involved with or has a concern about a child. In addition, it would also show protection and monitoring of the growth, care and development of children throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

The Office of the Prime Minister, in collaboration with iGovTT, is currently
evaluating the tenders of phase two, the Bill stage, with a view of having this electronic system completed in this fiscal. This is estimated to cost $1,622,000.

The community residences development project is expected to continue with a focus on the finalization of training to ensure children are cared for by well-trained caregivers, and that they receive sufficient support to allow their re-entry into society. Moves will be made to shift all training to an online platform with technical support from UNICEF and The University of the West Indies Open Campus. It is envisaged that this project would encourage stronger child care, child protection and child justice framework in Trinidad and Tobago.

There would be better care facilities and clearer expectations of the level of support for children deemed to be in need of care and protection, and the probability of children leaving state care becoming homeless or resorting to illegal activities for upkeep will be reduced. We will continue to build the awareness and knowledge of the population on the rights of children.

The educational resources and materials project is ongoing, with emphasis on the creation of branded educational resources, that is, print, video, social media and web-based on 11 child rights, child protection and child development topics.

The Child Rights Ambassadors Programme is expected to continue with children taking the lead to bring adults into awareness of their rights and responsibilities. In the new fiscal year, children will also be allowed to exercise their rights to participation and share their views on issues affecting their lives using creative arts online.

The child abuse and child rights awareness training programme will be ongoing, with efforts focusing on the development of a child protection curriculum to be delivered online. The project will be done with technical support from

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The emergency protocol for disasters—the expectation is to decrease in the number and/or intensity of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, decrease the participants measured sense of anxiety and increase the affected children sense of security hope for the future, and overall sense of happiness and satisfaction.

Given the trauma being experienced by children during COVID-19, the Office of the Prime Minister proposes in the new fiscal year to continue utilization of the services available under the UNICEF, Return to Happiness initiative, to reach the children in need of such support online and via social media. These projects will increase an awareness of social issues in society that impact children, increase public awareness of child rights and responsibilities and child protection strategies, contribute towards public awareness and social issues that will safeguard children, increase in child protection and child development resources, and a reduction in child abuse, and an increase in quality of care for children.

There are several other projects which will be advanced, including the drug rehabilitation programme which is earmarked to continue with modifications based on the impact of COVID-19. The institution of the office of the children’s commissioner is expected to continue in the new fiscal year. Through this office, it is expected that infringements on children’s rights can be resolved and children’s participation can be realized. This office will demonstrate, both nationwide and internationally, the country’s commitment to the best interest of the child, and upholding children’s rights to provide their opinion on issues affecting their lives as stated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Children’s Authority has been focused on service delivery and will continue in that vein to ensure that those children in need of care and protection are
Several major improvements will see a comprehensive case management solution, a modernized call centre, increased frontline professionals, finalized and operationalized the national child abuse protocol. The Authority will focus on the development and finalization of multiagency processes and programmes to help to divert those children who come before the courts. The Authority is set to increase its human resource capacity to meet the needs in a fit-for-purpose type organization model for the next three years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now turn my attention to the National Case Co-ordinating Committee secretariat. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has remained committed to the expansion of the HIV/AIDS response supporting treatment of all and to the new global agenda to end AIDS by 2030. Towards this end, the National AIDS Co-ordinating Committee was re-established to coordinate all implementation of activities to achieve the national, regional and international goals for HIV/AIDS epidemic control.

Acknowledging the work of all implementing parties, the NACC is specifically tasked with providing the policy and coordination of activities to guide the response, mobilization of investments and technical support, building capacity, engagement and empowerment of persons living with HIV, and monitoring and evaluating all aspects of the response. This includes the prioritization of gaps that would affect the ability of the country to maintain epidemic control and protect those who remain vulnerable from the disease.

Over the past fiscal year, the groundwork necessary for the achievement of the overarching goal of the NACC was significantly advanced. One of the major achievements was the approval of the national HIV/AIDS policy as a Green Paper.
Related projects through the NACC include the launch of its ad competition in 2019, “It’s Beautiful to Know”, which focused on HIV/AIDS sensitization awareness in Trinidad and Tobago. The art competition sought to engage young persons within the ages of five to 18 to use cultural ads to address matters related to HIV/AIDS.

In addition to these policy and project-related activities, there was a comprehensive response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The response included virtual town hall meetings; funding in the sum of $50,000 for persons who are living with HIV/AIDS and who were unable to access grants through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; the provision of hampers through a distribution by CSO for persons living with HIV/AIDS, as well as hampers for babies; the distribution of masks via groups for persons living HIV. Support was also provided for persons living with HIV by way of First Aid kits, as well as food support for persons living with HIV.

2.15 p.m.

In the new fiscal year, the NACC will focus on improving service delivery in the HIV and AIDS response by building capacity, improving interagency networking and efficiency across all implementing teams.

The NACC plans to propel its work obligations by strengthening its institutional capacity to ensure that there is an effective response to the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Programming in 2021 will therefore focus on the scale up of the prevention-based activity to maintain a low amount of new cases of HIV inclusive of the disaster management component and to decrease the impact of this disease on our working populations and economic costs of addressing the spread of the epidemic.

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To this end some of the major areas of prioritization will include the following: The national HIV and AIDS policy moving from a Green Paper to a White Paper, preparation of the strategic framework 2020 to 2030, and the national strategic plan 2020 to 2025. The National AIDS Coordinating Committee will work with UN AIDS and regional partners to develop a strategic framework 2020 to 2030 which will serve as a road map for guiding Trinidad and Tobago’s national response to achieve the global target of ending AIDS by 2030.

The NACC will be guided by the strategic framework in aligning and finalizing the next five years national strategic plan to allow for the full implementation in 2021 and beyond. This will be funded by US AIDS, as well as UNFPA.

Also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will be focusing on the rollout of a survey of knowledge, attitudes, practices and behaviour. In this new fiscal year 2020 to 2021, the survey of knowledge, attitudes, practices and behaviours will be designed and rolled out. This KAPB survey will serve to monitor and evaluate the impact of health promotion and behavioural change interventions contained in the national strategic plan.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member, you have two more minutes.

**Hon. A. Webster-Roy:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the two minutes that I have remaining I would like to take this opportunity to remind the people of Tobago East that under the last five years we would have seen meaningful growth and development in our constituency. Tobago East indeed became more beautiful under the hands of People’s National Movement. We have seen major infrastructural development works happening in the constituency.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to commend the Tobago Festivals Commission
for bringing the Tobago Heritage Festival online and creating a virtual festival this year. Even though the pandemic would have prevented Tobagonians from coming together in a physical space, many of us had the opportunity to celebrate our heritage in a virtual setting.

Again, as I speak to my constituents, there is more work to be done in Tobago East. There is a commitment from the central government and the Tobago House of Assembly to work in collaboration to ensure that Tobago East is able to advance and develop alongside all our sister constituencies throughout our nation. I would like to thank again the people of Tobago East for selecting me once again to be their representative, and thank the hon. Prime Minister for his support. Thank you all. [Desk thumping]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I would like to recognize the hon. Member for Moruga/Tableland. [Desk thumping]

**Ms. Michelle Benjamin (Moruga/Tableland):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to deliver my maiden contribution in this distinguished House. I begin by taking this opportunity to thank Almighty God for the wisdom and faith given to me to have the passion to serve his people. In doing so, the ability to stand here owes a debt of gratitude to many persons. I want to sincerely thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar for allowing me the opportunity to represent this great party.

This victory as the first female Member of Parliament for Moruga/Tableland was made possible [Desk thumping] by the unconditional support and love of family, friends, well-wishers, a dedicated campaign team and the constituents of Moruga/Tableland.

[MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

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And as I stand here boldly and proudly, I commit myself to representation for the people of Moruga/Tableland. According to former US President Barrack Obama, the strongest democracies flourish from frequent and lively debate and openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in government.

In the lead up to the general election and towards this budget debate there are several historical and emerging issues that continue to plague my constituency and Trinidad and Tobago which I will bring to the forefront.

Firstly, I will address the impact of this budget on the tourism sector. Madam Speaker, in 2015 when the PNM administration took control of our country they met a tourism sector with an operational sea and air bridge. We had in full operation ferries that allowed for trade, travel and tourism to boom. The new facilities for sports and medical tourism gave life to the sector, but what do we have today? A failed tourism sector. A tourism sector where the stakeholders are reeling from the effects of five years of neglect and broken promises, from the collapse of the sea bridge to Sandals to the closure of tourism education, they have failed in every respect.

Madam Speaker, in their true sense they come here to blame COVID-19 for the decline in the tourism sector when, in fact, they shattered it before. Yes, they crashed the tourism sector before. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, in April 2020 we had the Tobago Hotel and Tourism Association telling us, before COVID-19 hotel occupancy was a mere 30 per cent while others in the Caribbean region were averaging 60 per cent. [Desk thumping] In the last five years they have destroyed the sea and air bridges, halting trade and commerce between both islands, destroying foreign exchange and local business
investments.

We hear about the new ferries that are coming, but they did not get it right in the many failed ferries in the last five years. They crashed the sea bridge and destroyed the economy in Tobago, and they are here today telling us the boat is coming. [Desk thumping] Is it going to be another case where passengers will be jumping from boat to boat on the high seas before they could reach Tobago [Desk thumping] as it happened in the last five years? Total incompetence and mismanagement, Madam Speaker. By collapsing the sea bridge, this PNM Government has infringed on the constitutional right and freedom of movement for citizens from both islands in our nation.

They came to Parliament beating their chests, hailing the Sandals messiah as the only hope to rescue Tobago tourism. However, Tobagonians rejected the terms and conditions [Desk thumping] a Tobago Prime Minister offered to Sandals. In the end the failure of the scandal surrounding Sandals—the Sandals scandal made the PNM Government bury their collective heads in shame. And when we thought it could not get worse, we heard of the PNM controlled THA purchasing Manta Lodge and Sanctuary Villa for 40 million taxpaying dollars that is now enjoying the sea blast, collecting moss and stands as two white elephants. Yet they have to come mamaguy the population in this budget with talk about tourism accommodation upgrade; big joke.

Madam Speaker, the Kamla-led administration opened the grand Aquatic Centre and Cycling Velodrome that gave a boost to sport tourism. We had international sportsmen and women bringing foreign exchange to Trinidad and Tobago to use these facilities. But when you have a Minister of Sport who declared her ignorance when it comes to sports, the failure over the last five years comes as
no surprise. Based on what they have presented in this fiscal package it gives no confidence to the people of Trinidad and Tobago that tourism will boom. How can it, when they had so much at their disposal and crashed it? Tell me, you really think it will make a difference post-COVID now with less resources?

Madam Speaker, what are the Government’s plans and direction for reviving tourism post COVID? In the last five years they failed us in marketing our tourism brand, but now we have the dismantling of the Tourism Development Company and the sluggish approach they are taking in establishing the successor companies.

Madam Speaker, today I am left to think that the $50 million gift to Tobago hotels just before the election was meant as a blanket to cover the eyes of the neglected tourism sector but we will not be fooled by this.

Madam Speaker, if the UNC was in power the people of Trinidad and Tobago would have benefited from job creation, foreign direct investment, increase in cruise ship industry and [Desk thumping] private partnership investment, all through the lens of diversification of the economy.

Madam Speaker, I would like to turn my attention to culture and the creative arts. Over the last five years the PNM Government failed to generate meaningful creative industry development initiatives. [Desk thumping] Cultural spending was focused more on castles but not on the people and institutions that drive our cultural creative industry. The only tempo played by the PNM administration collapsed along with the broken the sea bridge. Even during a pandemic the cultural sector is being neglected. Case in point, the recent eviction of Uncle Errol Fabien and Gayelle the Channel could not even prompt a basic support from this Government. [Desk thumping] If not for citizens who helped, there will be no Gayelle today.
Today this Government does not care about culture, that is why they have ignored the plight of the cultural institutions while offering the mere pittance of income support to cultural sector workers in a mere sum of $5,000. However, even with this income support there are wide cross sections of cultural workers left in the dark, no funding whatsoever such as actors, singers, and the greatest one, players of our national instrument, the steel pan. These workers need more than just a one-time support. They need employment, something more sustainable done through reengineering the cultural and creative sectors. These fellow citizens are the camera crew, stagehand, songwriters, set designers, dancers, drummers, rhythm sections, and as seen with Gayelle, our cultural icons and ambassadors.

I say this to enlighten the new Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts that there are many stakeholders in Carnival, therefore, it is not enough to announce that there is no Carnival without meeting with stakeholders to see what viable alternatives are available. [Desk thumping]

Grenada, for example, hosted a cyber-monarch this August to respect COVID-19 restrictions, just as the Divali Nagar is planning to host virtually this year. My political leader the Member for Siparia has gifted you the idea of having a virtual Carnival 2021. [Desk thumping]

Do not even talk about our national instrument to which this Government shows contempt. That is why they left Pan Trinbago’s headquarters to rot because it was UNC that gave them the land. Every year they keep promising a pan factory that they never gave money for. If we were in Government we would have not just built the Pan Trinbago headquarters but a proper world-class facility for the manufacturing of the full-range of steel pans and supporting accessories [Desk thumping] to meet local and international demand.
What exactly have they done for culture and the creative arts over the last five years? Madam Speaker, CARIFESTA is one of the best expression of the regional culture and yet they failed even at that. Vendors by the bus load all over town complaining, they “aint get pay yet long after the festival done”, suffering the artistes. What an utter national disgrace. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, maybe I should take the opportunity to inform this House that stick fighting in Moruga/Tableland remains a signature event [Desk thumping] and we had the National Carnival Commission trying to deny funding to this.

Madam Speaker, I now turn my attention to the environment. Tourism and culture are heavily reliant on the environment but this Government does not have a clean environmental record. For example, we have a Venezuelan tanker dangerously listing in the Gulf of Paria, and this Government is frantically looking to distance themselves saying they do not know about it. Who gave its permission for entry? Should I call Delcy to find out? [Desk thumping] They promised but failed miserably to eradicate Styrofoam and single-use plastic bottles but check the La Basse and tell me, what is the largest solid waste component today? As usual zero solution from this PNM Government. [Desk thumping]

In 2018 it was said they will convert 30 per cent of government vehicles to CNG. I am asking for a friend: Have the vehicles of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Ministry of Local Government been converted? Lead by example, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

The climate change emergency is a globally defining issue, and it is imperative that we act now. Many homes have been outfitted with LED bulbs long before the proposed tax removal. It took a whole year to give four free light bulbs costing taxpayers $8.8 million.
Disaster preparedness, Madam Speaker. Our citizens were ridiculed and told they built in lagoons when the floods ravaged their homes. This Government has even resorted now to telling the nation that we must adapt to flooding. This is rank incompetence. [Desk thumping] For five years we have heard rehashed plans of flood mitigation to no avail. The reactive behaviour of this Government to disasters is quite contrary to the proactive approach of the United National Congress. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I now turn my attention to my constituency of Moruga/Tableland to speak of the neglect and open bias over the last five years. Madam Speaker, over the last five years access to the basic necessity of potable water in Moruga/Tableland like many other constituencies continues to be the myth. The fact that this situation existed under the former PNM representative means they do not care about the people of Moruga/Tableland. [Desk thumping] Five years of broken promises to the people of Trinidad and Tobago despite huge allocations to WASA, to the public utilities Ministry. Yet we have WASA still telling us that dams are low. The whole of Trinidad and Tobago flooding but WASA’s dams are empty. [Desk thumping]

My colleagues, I speak to you as the living example because I am from Moruga/Tableland [Desk thumping] where there are families who were already struggling long before COVID-19 to make ends meet even in the face of rising prices, they have to find money to buy bottled water and truck-borne water to cook and bathe because there is no water in their pipelines; pure wickedness, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, pipelines were laid in John Joe Marac since 2018 that still has not been commissioned by WASA. They expect water to flow by magic. And
it is because of this situation some of my constituents are forced to go by the river to wash their clothes.

I take you to the point of connectivity and telecommunications. The PNM administration continues to neglect rural constituencies who are beyond their eyesight. For how many more years do we have to wait for allocation for improved telephone lines and internet connection in areas like Marac, Platinite, Corosan, La Ruffin and Penal Rock Road in my constituency? This despite their repeated promises to digitize our country, now they are coming to tell us about Mi-Fi hotspot devices after they failed to even place Internet devices in PTSC buses. Another broken promise just like the high-speed broadband network since 2015. How can we believe they will implement Mi-Fi after PNM is known for broken promises? [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, in my constituency of Moruga/Tableland alone there are over 3,000 students without devices. There are areas that still do not have cell phone service. And whilst they scrapped the laptop programme for all, they have replaced it with a laptop programme for the selected few. I can reference so many areas which do not have electricity in 2020 as we have seen highlighted in the news. Some of the areas in Moruga/Tableland are parts of Penal Rock Road, Platinite, Nagee Road who applied for electricity and still they do not have a light pole placed in their streets. How are these children supposed to learn?

Socioeconomic impacts, Madam Speaker. As a former councillor and now MP I can tell you of the horrors of the socioeconomic impacts in Moruga/Tableland during the last five years. I begin with unemployment.

Madam Speaker, the number of unemployed people continues to increase with this inept PNM administration. [Desk thumping] Many of my former
burgesses and now constituents have their daily bread and butter snatched from them. Do not let them fool you as they will try to blame COVID. They will try, Madam Speaker, but I beg, do not let them fool you, these problems existed way before COVID-19. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I have another burning issue. Pre-election my field officers were able to identify that there were approximately 22 URP gangs working. And now as the election is over, I see many of these people coming to my office looking for work. It has been brought to my attention that there are now 12 URP gangs in my constituency. Can the Government explain when and why this reduction occurred? Is URP now a PNM Unemployment Relief Programme?

Madam Speaker, it does not stop there. The two major areas in Moruga/Tableland without URP gangs are Barrackpore and Tableland and yet they boast of equality for all. What about the reduction in the financial allocation to the Princes Town Regional Corporation [Desk thumping] which curtailed their ability to employ persons. Can the Government explain this?

Madam Speaker, I now highlight the red-tape food card programme. They all speak equity and no one being left behind. It was even emphasized in their manifesto. Yet there are families who are starving because of the countless requirements for documents and statements just to have a meal. Some of these families manage to provide all that was requested of them, yet still, Madam Speaker, they are denied. This makes me question, is it a friend and a family affairs. As I stand here I can speak of over 100 families who have applied and are still waiting. Furthermore, there are many families who have been pulled from the social welfare and disability programme without reasons, Madam Speaker. I am representing these families who are in need and desperate for help and have fallen
at the closed door of the current administration. I will fight for you, the UNC and I are here to fight for you. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I now turn my attention to agriculture. This Government boast about the e-Tech Moruga Agro-Processing and Light Industrial Park as a factory shell for the farmers of Moruga/Tableland in the sum TT $90 million. The PISP reports, key projects aimed at boosting exports in international markets while enhancing economic capital for persons within Moruga/Tableland environs. Today we are still waiting for the layout of how this is to be used. Has the international market being accessed? And the enhancement of the economic capital of the persons’ occurred? The question lingers. How many Moruga/Tableland farmers benefited from this initiative to date? Like the farmers, I too am curious to know. To date, Madam Speaker, it remains just an empty shell.

Allow me to you to the point of the Gran Chemin Fishing Facility in which the grand sod turning took place just before the election. Will the 18 months promised for commission turn into five years until you demit office? I wait patiently to see. But I would not fail to mention the neglect over the years to the fisherfolk who battled daily with the increases in fuel price to ply their trade. This resulted in them operating at a daily loss.

Agricultural infrastructure in my constituency is suffering under this Government. The Cunjal food crop project is an agricultural project that was started by the former sugarcane workers. To this date farmers are still waiting on infrastructural work to be done. This spans from road access to electricity and again not forgetting water. What do we have to wait for, elections 2025 to get this done? Just as they hustled to give this cemetery allocation to Barrackpore?

Madam Speaker, the farmers in Moruga/Tableland are considered as the
food basket of the country, La Savanne, Barrackpore and Tableland. Just imagine US network TV found it important to highlight the pineapple farmers of Moruga/Tableland, yet this Government has done absolutely nothing enhance the market capacity. The farmers are only remembered when election bells rings. Why play “politricks” with agriculture? Why play with our food? The challenge continues; just imagine land tenure remains an issue and this makes it difficult for them to access loans from the Agricultural Development Bank.

Another issue facing these farmers is the ability to obtain the farmers’ badge. Yes, Madam Speaker, you heard me right; a farmer’s badge. This further compounds their problem. These farmers are unable to benefit from agricultural incentives and subsidies. The Government speaks about boosting agriculture and agriculture diversification, but the proposals in this budget do not give us any confidence or hope that anything will change in the next five years.

And on this note allow me to ask about the ownership of the famous La Gloria pasture in Tableland? How was the contract awarded? Via which Cabinet Note? And to whom and for what purpose? [Desk thumping] Would it be another friend and family affairs? “Ah waitin’ to hear dat one”, Madam Speaker.

Infrastructure: Madam Speaker, when it comes to infrastructure for Moruga/Tableland I would like to ask in local parlance, “where de money gone”? TT $178 million, yes. Landslips have been the bane of our existence. Imagine in Moruga where a landslip was fixed from end to end the work has failed. On a point of importance, Madam Speaker, Lengua Road is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Works and Transport was visited by the entire Cabinet on February 13, 2019, and yet still they were neglected. One home was lost and a further seven are on the verge of collapse. Is the Government going to wait until a disaster strikes
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again to put these families under further mental strain to apply for some grant or to wait for an HDC house for which they have to pay? So at the end of it, it is like some of these people are paying for two houses in these hard economic times, Madam Speaker.

2.45 p.m.

I strongly suggest we start the work to save the homes of these people now. Sixth Company Circular, an area known to the Members of the United National Congress, because we tried to assist, but this is another area plagued by landslips. Again, houses are being threatened. “Whey de money gone”, Madam Speaker? They were in Government for the last five years, so they can only blame themselves. Madam Speaker, let us move to Barrackpore. It was said by the former PNM Minister for Social Development, that the people of south built their homes in lagoons, and, just to note recent flooding would have affected people living in Diego Martin. I am sure it was not said by my colleagues on this side of the bench that they built in lagoons. Flooding is a perennial problem in Barrackpore. What the people need is for the waterways to be dredged so that after 15 minutes of rainfall the people are not marooned.

Madam Speaker, on a wider note, have the people of Ants Nest Road, Nagee Road, Frederick Road, Realize Road, Sahadat Road, Penal Rock Road, Tableland, Cunjal, have they been forgotten? I would not like to think these people must wait for 2025 when a PNM campaign is in full swing to be promised a quick fix. These are taxpaying citizens, and we all know the Member for Diego Martin North/East likes taxpaying citizens. They contribute to the gross domestic product too. We are a twin island nation, but with the threat of landslips the people of Lonely Road, Indian Walk are soon to be cut off on an island of their own. If you feel I am
joking come and see. Madam Speaker, coastal erosion is plaguing the residents of Moruga. Climate change trends are affecting everyone and we need to put things in place.

Madam Speaker, I now take my attention to the health care system in Moruga/Tableland, Another burning issue, there are three health centres in the constituency, namely Rochard Douglas, Indian Walk and Gran Chemin. Madam Speaker, persons who are serviced in Indian Walk and Barrackpore can also be serviced by Princes Town and San Fernando health facilities. In the event of an emergency after 4.00 p.m., however, when we look at areas like Marac, they have to traverse 35 to 40 kilometres to Princes Town health facility, because the facility at Gran Chemin is not a 24-hour facility. This health centre services over 3,507 persons. Madam Speaker, with regard to Indian Walk and Rochard Douglas health facilities, the number of residents they are serving is overwhelming. I know first-hand that there are many persons who have to stand on the roadway, or even sit in their cars whilst waiting to see a doctor at the Indian Walk health facility. There must be contingency plans in place for this in light of the global pandemic.

Madam Speaker, I now take my attention to the crime response time of the TTPS in Moruga/Tableland. The constituents of the Moruga/Tableland continue to lament the rising spate of crime in the area with recent robberies. The citizens would expect efficient service from the law and protective agents of the land. But often the service leaves much to be desired. This is despite National Security receiving an allocation of 6.4 billion in the last fiscal, and 5.2 billion in this fiscal package. When there is an issue to deal with the police is contacted. A citizen is often sung a road march, we have no vehicle. This is not to ill speak the good officers of the TTPS, but is to highlight the poor allocation of resources to
Moruga/Tableland by the Government. [Desk thumping]

The Government has left our borders wide open in Moruga, threatening the safety and security of residents. They repeatedly announced to the nation that the borders are closed. They say that citizens abroad can return once they apply and the approval is granted. But how can the borders be closed when there are boat loads of migrants who land on the Moruga shore on a daily basis? Madam Speaker, the Government has failed at border control. [Desk thumping] The people of Moruga have been reporting to me that they have been deceived by the Government on the matter of decriminalization of marijuana. They were encouraged to freely plant cannabis by the agents of the PNM when they wanted their vote. But now they are seeing persons being jailed for the same ganja. This is deception at the highest. Education—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6).

Madam Speaker: I will just ask you that last part, if you could withdraw it and put it in another way.

Ms. M. Benjamin: I humbly withdraw, Madam Speaker. It is just members of Moruga/Tableland, they felt cheated and misled. I humbly withdraw.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Standing Order 48(6), again—[Crosstalk] Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), she has to go against the Standing Orders. [Crosstalk]

Madam Speaker: Okay! So, Member, I have taken that you have withdrawn it, and I understand that you are unfamiliar, but all of this will help guide you along the way, so just withdraw it. If you could find another way to say it without offending, if not just leave it and move on.

Ms. M. Benjamin: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the issues I am
highlighting are issues that were raised by my constituents, and I promised to be their voice in this House. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, there are parents who are struggling to feed their children, who are off the School Feeding Programme since March 13, 2020. The struggle of the parents is real. Madam Speaker, the Government proposed a distribution of 500 lunches. Though it was insufficient in the amount announced, the calls to my office in the couple of days that it was opened when this announcement was made was overwhelming, and then the lunches were cancelled. Madam Speaker, I say this because persons, families, parents, they need assistance in these trying times. They do not need PNM promises, and they do not need a government that does not hear, or a government that is not concerned. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, the Government remains unchanged from those in the last five years. There was a minor Cabinet reshuffle in August. As we move into the next term, the people of Trinidad and Tobago are not confident that this Government can erase the poor record of false promises and neglect to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, prior to COVID-19, the youths of Moruga/Tableland, and by extension Trinidad and Tobago had little or no opportunities for employment. The freezing of the public sector hiring and other measures from the budget laid in this House, the unemployed youth on the street have little or no opportunity. This budget is only but a smokescreen that will further take from the people of our nation. The suffering of the masses continues with this budget. The people have to endure the same incompetence from the same Government with a similar Cabinet over the next five years. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, the budget provides no hope at a time where the nation is at its greatest hour of need. Madam Speaker, let us hope that this Government hears the cries of the many neglected. Thank you.
Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I wish to recognize this as the maiden contribution by the Member for Moruga/Tableland, and I congratulate her. [Desk thumping] Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West. [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is with a sense of honour and great pride and humility that I stand in this august House to contribute to the national debate for the financial 2020 to 2021. I am humbled by the opportunity to give an account of the work being done in the public utilities sector, to support and to facilitate the transformation of Trinidad and Tobago’s economy.

But before I do so, Madam Speaker, I must put on record my unequivocal support for the national budget as is proposed by the Minister of Finance and the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the hon. Colm Imbert. I commend him and the technocrats of the Ministry of Finance for their work and sacrifice. I also recognize and salute the work and the contribution done by the Minister of Planning and Development, the hon. Member for Arouca/Maloney, and her technocrats, to give support to this blueprint for economic recovery. And last but by no means least, the hon. Prime Minister, the Member for Diego Martin West, for his stable hands of leadership and guidance through these rough waters.

Indeed, Madam Speaker, we are even more grateful to God to have him as our nation’s chief servant during these challenging times. Trinidad and Tobago continues to do far better than those who are categorize as far more advanced than us, and we remain a true jewel and a shining light despite our challenges. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, I also wish to thank the constituents of Lopinot/Bon Air West for making the right choice in electing me to be their representative and
their voice in this Parliament. Their vote and their trust mean much to me, and I intend to do my very best to represent their interest with humility, passion and integrity in the finest traditions of the only political party, the People’s National Movement. [Desk thumping]

This constituency, Madam Speaker, has so much to offer to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, especially in the areas of ecotourism, agriculture, sports. I have already started my discussion with my colleagues in the Cabinet, the Minister of Youth Affairs, the Minister of Agriculture, the Member for Tobago West, all in an effort to bring development to the people of Lopinot/Bon Air West, a constituency as I have said, that can offer the people of Trinidad and Tobago so much. We propose to restore the historical site at Lopinot. We propose to restore the agricultural industry in the constituency. We intend to utilize the old Five Rivers Junior Secondary School as a training centre for young people. The construction of multipurpose centres in Mausica and Cleaver Heights to revive community activities for constituents, just to name a few.

But before I go on, Madam Speaker, I must put on record my disappointment with the extent to which some Members of this Opposition have gone to paint this country as a horror story, creating taglines that the economy was crashed before COVID to confuse unsuspecting listeners and viewers. I have a reasonable understanding of politics, and I do understand that politics is not a Bishop’s tea party, and that the role of the Opposition is not to make the Government look good, as their previous leader once said. I get that, Madam Speaker. But the tone I have heard from some Members of the Opposition to paint the worst picture of our circumstances must be strenuously rejected out of hand. [Desk thumping] It is an attempt to create their own reality to suit their own narrow
selfish political agenda. The budget response by the Opposition Leader sounds to me more like a response to the spate of billboards going all over Trinidad and Tobago, has absolutely nothing to do with the budget being presented by the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East. Nevertheless, Madam Speaker, despite their doom and despite their gloom, I take confidence in the words of the psalmist, “Yea though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil; for thou art with me thy rod and thy staff they shall comfort me”. I also take confidence in the words of Isaiah, that no weapon formed against us shall prosper. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition in a desperate attempt to grab news headlines called upon Government MPs to take a pay cut. But, Madam Speaker, I want to throw out a challenge to the hon. Member for Siparia, join us in the fight to get back at least 50 per cent of the moneys stolen in this country between 2010 and 2015 [Desk thumping] and I assure her that we as a country will be in a far better place as we navigate these global economic storms. If we can only get back 50 per cent of the moneys that were stolen in this country between 2010 and 2015, we do not need a pay cut. [Desk thumping]

Ms. Ameen: 48(6), Madam Speaker. 48(6). [Desk thumping]
Hon. Member: Bring back the [Inaudible] money. Bring back NLCB money.
Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan, if you will only look this way you will see I am on my legs. Overruled, please continue.
Hon. M. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, I want to remind my hon. colleagues on the opposite side that the election has come and the election has gone, and the people of this country have voted the PNM to govern their affairs. [Desk thumping] Govern their affairs, and that is why we are on this side and that they are on the other side. The people of

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Trinidad and Tobago put you for the second time in the Opposition and put the PNM to manage our circumstances, and that we shall do, Madam Speaker. That we shall do. [Desk thumping] These are indeed turbulent times, Madam Speaker, not just for our beautiful twin island, but for the global village as a whole. What our Government has set out to do, guided of course by the Roadmap to Recovery Committee, is to chart not only to hold hands—not only to hold the ship steady in these turbulent times, but also that points in the direction of a new economy and a new society.

Indeed, Madam Speaker, according to Phase 2 of the report of the Roadmap to Recovery, and I quote:

The answers to the current situation do not lie simply in increased investment of resources, but more so on how the country affects the transformation of the economy. It shows how as a nation we address the food security challenge, and how as public and private sectors we make equity and empathy central to the economic and social life of this country.

Madam Speaker, Government's readiness to face these challenges is nothing short of courageous, given the current constraints. But if not now, when? If not us, who? And so I commend the Minister of Finance and his team for setting the stage for this necessary and long overdue transformation. And I recall the words of our hon. Prime Minister, that had it not been for the PNM, if not for the PNM, Trinidad and Tobago will be in dire circumstances and we will have to find a way to create or to invent the PNM in order to save this country. So the people of this country, as I have said, they have given us a—[ Interruption]

**Madam Speaker:** Members, I think we did very well this morning in terms of observing Standing Order 53, and I urge you all to continue in that vein. Please
Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, the public utilities sector has a pivotal role to play in the transformation of this new society and the economy. I am indeed humbled by the confidence reposed in me by the hon. Prime Minister in entrusting me with the responsibility to provide strategic leadership to the sector. The citizens of Trinidad and Tobago continue to demand efficient public utilities services, and they deserve nothing less. This is another watershed moment for the delivery of public utilities services in Trinidad and Tobago. This is an opportunity for a new beginning, and I intend to do my part while holding true to my oath of office, to conscientiously, impartially and to the best of my ability discharge my duties to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, utility services around the world directly impact the quality of life of their citizens, and they play a central role in economic development. Without reliable, affordable electricity, water, telecommunications, postal and waste management services, projects would not be able to get off the ground, and the benefits that they bring to their stakeholder communities and the society at large would be forfeited. We at the Ministry of Public Utilities are fully appreciative of and remain committed to providing efficient and effective leadership for the operations of the utilities sector. Our efforts over this fiscal year will focus on operational efficiency, reliability, governance and accountability, customer service and innovation. We acknowledge that in some areas what is needed is a transformation of the current arrangement and the adoption of new business models, and we find our courage in the fact that efficiency is what the people of Trinidad and Tobago have been demanding. Madam Speaker, we intend to meet those demands. Too many of my fellow citizens are dissatisfied with the
quality of service that our public utilities provide. Too many of them are terribly inconvenienced and frustrated, and this is something, Madam Speaker, that the PNM Government intends to address as we construct, or reconstruct rather, our economic model, and strive towards better efficiency and accountability by our state enterprises.

Madam Speaker, I turn to the Water and Sewerage Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. Let us as a matter of priority address this elephant in the room, the Water and Sewerage Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, COVID-19 has demonstrated how essential water is to public health, lives and livelihood. Over the last few months, households, businesses and institutions alike have increased their demand for water usage in response to the public health mandatory practice of frequently washing hands and sanitizing to fight off this pandemic. In the months to come there will also be a greater demand for water as we ramp up food production, manufacturing and industry to stabilize and grow our economy. What COVID-19 has done, Madam Speaker, is expose the vulnerabilities of our water supply system and its management, something I witnessed first-hand in my interactions with residents of the national community, from the tireless exasperated complaints I have received from across Trinidad and Tobago, since assuming the portfolio of Minister of Public Utilities.

Madam Speaker, I am aggrieved yet impassioned to confront this challenge head on. [Desk thumping] My role is to set the Government’s policy and hold the utility to account to the citizens of this country, the taxpayers, the customers, for both its successes and its failures. This is my social contract as MP and Minister of Public Utilities, that those charged with the responsibility of providing reliable water and waste water services will be monitored and held to account with full UNREVISED
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Hon. M. Gonzales (cont’d)

disclosure and transparency to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This year WASA has received a reduction in direct government subsidy in comparison to the last five years. This was not only driven by the current state of our economy, but it is a deliberate thrust to ignite greater efficiency in the operations of WASA. Government has mandated the authority to revamp its execution of capital projects with transparent procurement and the re-engineering of project management systems. Systemic changes will also have to be made in the utilization of limited resources, human material and equipment that are aligned with WASA’s strategic targets.

Madam Speaker, the projects that the Government has agreed to fund include the rehabilitation of WASA’s waste water network, which would extend sewage facilities to a larger portion of the country that will benefit over 140,000 citizens. Funding has also been directed to WASA to increase water production by drilling more wells. Ground water has proven to be far more resilient to fluctuating weather patterns than surface water sources. Dams and rivers, these ground water wells are also localized sources of supply, so water can directly reach customers in the various communities around Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, over this fiscal year the focus will be on rehabilitating existing wells and drilling and equipping new wells in Trinidad and Tobago. These anticipated works will provide 56,500 citizens with a more reliable and continuous water supply. Madam Speaker, the task of developing new sources of ground water becomes even more urgent when one factors in the cost of desalinated water in Trinidad and Tobago. Because of the UNC’s destructive policies in water management, WASA desalination purchase bill from both Desalcott and Seven Seas is a whopping US $7 million per month. This take-or-pay contractual arrangement was initially due to expire in
2022 when it was first entered into, but was further extended to 2036 when the UNC came into power in 2010. Indeed, Madam Speaker, elections do have consequences, and the error of electing the UNC into government in 2010 has put a noose around the people and the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago’s necks with a whopping bill of US $7 million per month. Elections do have consequences. [Desk thumping]

In addition to increasing water production, money has also been directed to upgrade WASA treatment plants and associated infrastructure. This includes work on the country’s major supply—source of supply, the Caroni water treatment plant. Works are also expected to be fast tracked at the Hillsborough dam in Tobago. Actual dredging will begin in this fiscal year and will increase water storage and its capacity at this reservoir. Through these works, WASA will be able to ramp up its production in both Trinidad and in Tobago, and increase its output to customers. In recognizing WASA’s problem, Madam Speaker, through leaking pipes all around the country, the Government has allocated funding to WASA to reduce the continuous loss of water. The reality, Madam Speaker, is that the country’s water supply is inextricably linked to our environment and specifically our watersheds. We cannot neglect water resource management and the role of multiple land use regulators such as Town and Country Planning Division, the EMA, regional corporations and the Minerals Division. These are increasingly necessary in our drive to sustain the quantity and the quality of our abundantly available freshwater resources.

3.15 p.m.

Madam Speaker, WASA finds itself in the untenable position of receiving an annual subsidy of $1.8 billion while providing a round the clock water supply to
just under half of the population; $1.8 billion on an annual basis and only provides the population of this country just under 50 per cent with a reliable water supply. This is even more unacceptable given the fact that over the last 10 years WASA has received a total of $22.7 billion in state subsidy, WASA owes contractors just over $1 billion with just about $600 million in unrecorded liabilities. About $700 million is owed to the utility company by its customers. Madam Speaker, the situation is similar to a red flashing light and the time for urgent intervention in the affairs of the Water and Sewerage Authority is now. [Desk thumping]

The truth is, Madam Speaker, that since its establishment by an Act of Parliament in 1965, WASA has been plagued by a number of problems that have all gotten worst over the past 55 years. My predecessors have stood in this august Chamber and outlined those challenges in detail, so I would refrain from doing so. I would say however that we in the Cabinet subcommittee have made significant headways in our finding and without pre-empting our report to the Prime Minister and my Cabinet colleagues I can make certain pronouncements.

Madam Speaker, there have been numerous studies, assessments, reports prepared by WASA in the last 20 years across different administrations and these have all drawn up similar conclusions. These reports and our findings showed that there are many inefficiencies in WASA. One primary challenge however is the issue of measurement. The authority does not have the capacity—after 50 years of existence the authority does not have the capacity to measure how much of the water it provides to the various communities around Trinidad and Tobago. This is something that other utilities, including T&TEC, are capable of doing, and the fact that WASA does not have such capacity has all sorts of repercussions for the management and operations of the utility.
I also acknowledge the population’s dissatisfaction with the service it receives from WASA. Every Member of Parliament, Madam Speaker, can attest to the fact that on a regular basis so many of our constituents come to us and complain about the inadequacy of our water supply, the inability of WASA to repair the roads in a satisfactory manner. That is something that every single Member of Parliament can attest to. And therefore we ought to stop playing politics where water is concerned and get our collective heads together [Desk thumping] and fix this problem once and for all. It is not a political problem, it is not a political issue. It is a national issue that requires a national response on both sides of the political divide.

Madam Speaker, to assure the population—and we come to the issue of rates. Madam Speaker, I must highlight the fact that the challenge of improving the country’s water supply services is not just the remit of WASA, the MPU, or the Government. WASA water tariff is one of the lowest in the world with the average household paying just $3 a day. Unfortunately the result is that many of us do not value or conserve our water resources. This, Madam Speaker, must also change. And so the legal mechanism for a rate review will be initiated. A rate review is also necessary to ensure the survival of WASA and to ensure its future sustainability to protect the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago in terms of water production and water distribution.

Madam Speaker, to assure the population that should the rate review show the need for increase water rates in Trinidad and Tobago, the Government will make every effort to lessen the burden on the most vulnerable sectors in the society. Those who are most in need of such subsidy, we are already subsidizing WASA and T&TEC bills for eligible households under the Utilities Assistance
Programme. Last year alone 12,350 households received assistance by paying their WASA bills and their electricity bills. Madam Speaker, we also provide some needy households that were not connected to WASA’s pipelines with a water supply. These projects, carried out under the Community Improvement Project, benefited a number of our citizens.

Madam Speaker, I now turn to the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission. T&TEC, which despite being formed for two decades before WASA, has been able to keep up with the growing demands of the population including the residential and industrial sectors. Madam Speaker, the Commission currently provides reliable electricity services to 99 per cent of the country and serves a customer base of 494,000 customers. And we continue to expand on that base through our electrification programme which provides an electricity supply to underserved communities and low income households that are not connected to the electricity grid. I wish to commend and congratulate the staff, the management, the Board of T&TEC, for doing yeoman service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and continuing to provide reliable electrical services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago despite strained circumstances. Madam Speaker, we must congratulate them for that. [Desk thumping] We understand that they are operating under difficult circumstances but essentially they continue to provide a reliability electricity service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Despite T&TEC’s reliability and relative operational efficiency, particularly in the area of customer service, the Commission’s financial outlook is cause for concern. Up until recently T&TEC owed the National Gas Company $750 million for natural gas used to generate electricity over the last 11 years. Five hundred million dollars of that debt has been settled in an arrangement with
T&TEC, the National Gas Company, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Public Utilities. On the other end of the equation, Madam Speaker, the Commission is owed US $147 million by customers. These shortfalls undoubtedly impact the cash flow of the Commission and its ability to conduct business in a timely and routinely manner and as such they must and will be addressed in this new financial year. Despite these challenges, Madam Speaker, the electricity company is one of the shining lights of the public utility sector and one of the primary stakeholders and drivers in Government’s thrust towards a more sustainable energy future.

Our abundant supply of natural gas is on the decline and a supply demand mismatched has emerged. That disparity, coupled with the fact that our electricity sector has priority on natural gas at a lower than market rate has resulted in a scenario where our declining energy resources are not being maximized for the benefit of our country and our people. On the global front, Madam Speaker, countries and multi-national corporations alike are pivoting away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy sources and energy conservation and efficiency practices to ensure a more sustainable energy future. Even BP, one of the leaders in the global energy industry, recently indicated a pivotal shift in its focus from an international oil company to an integrated energy efficient company. BP’s decision to embrace the global energy transition is evidence that change is upon us and we must play our part in Trinidad and Tobago.

From that perspective the Energy Conservation and Energy Efficiency Policy, an action plan for Trinidad and Tobago, 2020-2024 as developed by this PNM Cabinet is a timely and critical document that must be owned and acted upon by the national community with a degree of urgency. And I am happy to say,
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Madam Speaker, that we have already started to and will continue to implement some of the initiatives outlined in that plan. For example, a 1.4 megawatt plant is being constructed at Piarco International Airport. This project is in support of the EU funded ICAO-EU joint assistance project titled: Capacity Building for CO₂ Mitigation from International Aviation. A solar project will be constructed at the Queen’s Park Savannah. The project comprises a 700 kilowatt carport, two electric vehicle chargers, an LED carport lighting systems and it is being funded by the United Arab Emirates Caribbean Renewable Energy Fund. [Desk thumping] An inter-ministerial and multi-agency committee is in the process of developing an integrated resources and resilience plan for electricity for the next 25 years. This planning process will facilitate the phased implementation of renewable energy power generation and will aim for 30 per cent renewable energy power by 2030. [Desk thumping] This project is being funded by the Caribbean Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency.

With respect to power generation, Madam Speaker, the electricity sector will be diversified. Two utility scale solar plants will be constructed, one at Orange Grove, and one at Brechin Castle, totaling 112.22 megawatts AC. The construction of these renewable energy plants means that the Government’s commitment to the Paris Agreement regarding reduced carbon emissions from the power generation sector is well on the way. On the residential front, Madam Speaker, the MPU has facilitated the installation of six solar systems to provide electricity to households for various reasons that cannot access T&TEC’s electric grid.

In an effort to encourage the use of energy efficiency and energy conservation in the public sector, we at the Ministry of Public Utilities are also spearheading the implementation of energy audits in government’s buildings. The

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findings of these audits, Madam Speaker, will then inform technical retrofits and
the establishment of workplace policies to ensure that more sustainable use of our
energy resources. A pilot audit conducted on Tower C of the International
Waterfront revealed that just turning off the lights and controlling the AC
temperature at night in that building alone can save as much as $350,000 annually.
And if fully embraced by the national community our energy conversation and
efficiency plan can lead to $1.2 billion in energy cost savings over the next five
years and $2.72 billion by 2030. This in addition to a decrease in our carbon
dioxide emissions of about six million tonnes over the next five years and 18
million tonnes by 2030.

Madam Speaker, I turn to SWMCOL, the Trinidad and Tobago Solid Waste
Management Company. Since we are on the topic of environmental awareness,
Madam Speaker, I now bring our attention to another agency that falls under the
purview of the MPU. The Solid Waste Management Company has continued to
focus its on key initiatives, meant to transform our waste sector into an integrated
waste management system. And under the governance of the MPU it has made
significant progress in the areas of landfill management, waste and recycling
management and public education and awareness. It has also continued
implementation of the Public Sector Recycling Programme which has been rolled
out to approximately 33 Ministries and state enterprises across Trinidad and
Tobago. The Workplace Waste Reduction and Recycling Programme, a similar
recycling initiative, has also been sustained.

This programme, Madam Speaker, has been adopted by approximately 12
private sector companies in the insurance, banking and academic sectors and we
intend to roll it out to other private sector companies over the next two to three
years. And then there is the Municipal Curbside Recycling Project which involves partnerships with 14 municipal corporations to collect recyclable materials from communities and schools over a period of six months. This pilot phase will then inform a full scale roll out across Trinidad and Tobago and to date the programme has been successfully implemented in nine municipalities across Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, one project that is already well on its way to implementation is the establishment of the beverage containers deposit fund system. The draft legislation to effect such a system will be presented in the Parliament in the coming months and once established it would provide the legal framework for the efficient and sustainable recovery of recyclable beverage containers thus preventing their disposal in our landfills. This particular project, Madam Speaker, has been decades in the making and I would like to recognize my predecessor Mr. Robert Le Hunte and his team at the MPU who would have established or pushed it closer to actualization, and I thank them most sincerely for that. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I turn to the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation. Citizens’ access to postal services is considered by the UN to be a fundamental human right underpinned by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. TTPost is charged with delivering this obligation on behalf of the Government and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, the advancement in technology and a global and national focus on digitizing the delivery of services has significantly impacted the financial position of TTPost as well as similar types of agencies around the world. The corporation has recorded a 50 per cent decline in traditional mail volumes over the past 10 years owing to a
shift in the way we communicate in this world. And as a consequence revenue earned from core postal services year on year continues to be adversely affected. Revenue projections for fiscal 2020/2021, Madam Speaker, for example, are projected at $67 million, while TTPost operating expenses average $141 million with Government’s allocation for the same period at $75 million. The impact of this decline in core postal services and its correlation with reduced revenue forces TTPost into an aggressive state of transformation to ensure its survival. And in fact, the company has been doing quite a lot to re-engineer its processes and reinvent itself and therefore, Madam Speaker, the shift has resulted in financial gains for the agency.

Madam Speaker, in 2020 the corporation formed a strategic alliance with the Ministry of Works and Transport for the implementation of its revolutionary UTurn System. That project involved the national roll-out of a Red-Light Camera Enforcement System, a Demerit Point System and a Reformed Fixed Penalty Ticketing System. It also resulted in the continued Transformation of the Licensing Division. Similarly, a partnership with the Ministry of National Security to improve the process of citizens applying and receiving their passports and a re-engineered passport application process. Just this morning I read the newspapers and I recognized since the launch of this project over 66 citizens have benefited from this new system that was launched via partnership with the Ministry of National Security and TTPost. Citizens can now apply for their passports from the comfort of their homes or their offices and that TTPost courier will have the passport delivered at their home or their offices. [Desk thumping] This is what it takes, Madam Speaker. This is a great symbol and it is a good representation for public service in Trinidad and Tobago and I wish to commend the Ministry of
National Security as well as TTPPost for this great initiative. [Desk thumping]

And very soon, Madam Speaker, I am also aware that TTPPost is in collaboration and in discussion with the Ministry of Works and Transport where a similar initiative will be launched for driver’s permit and certified copies; where citizens can now apply for their divers permit renewal or their certified copies in the comfort of their home and access the option to get a TTPPost courier to deliver such drivers permit or their certified copies in their homes or at their offices, Madam Speaker. TTPPost is transitioning to the new challenges of this world and I am confident that TTPPost very soon will become a self-sufficient state agency. [Desk thumping] In the private sector, Madam Speaker, TTPPost has forged partnerships with the international courier, DHL, and with the Canadian High Commission for the delivery of US and Canadian visas to local applicants.

Madam Speaker, allow me to turn the focus to the national address improvement and postal code system project. This project is geared towards modernizing the postal sector through the application of an international standard of addressing, the S42 standard and the implementation of a postal code system. Madam Speaker, in the next financial year I intend to make this a reality once and for all in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker. This utility provider that has transitioned its business model over the years has done quite a lot to modernize itself, to re-engineer itself and to provide sound services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago especially during this global pandemic. There can be no doubt that connectivity and access to information of utmost importance in times like these, Madam Speaker. I am happy to report that TSTT took its role seriously as a telecommunications provider in Trinidad and
Tobago and implemented a number of initiatives for the benefit of the people and the benefit of its customers. These include, Madam Speaker:

- The provision of 5,000 devices to the Ministry of Education along with the creation of a student plan, mobile package which will allow in-need students to access five gigabytes of mobile data at no cost for at least an initial three-month period.

[Desk thumping]

- The zero rating of specific websites such as the Ministry of Education, the National Library, NALIS, the University of the West Indies and the University of Trinidad and Tobago.
- The provision of relief to a number of schools and their students by providing mobile devices, customized data plans and Wi-Fi devices as required.

I heard the previous speaker from Member for Moruga/Tableland throwing cold water and criticizing the Government’s ability to provide this service. I have news for her. TSTT has already stepped up to the table and providing these services to the school children of this country and providing strategic support to the Ministry of Education.

The facilitation in partnership with Huawei of a virtual meeting between COVID-19 health experts from Shanghai China and the Ministry of Health. This meeting provide a forum for bilateral discussions which aided in the development of a national action plan in coordination with the global response to the global pandemic. These initiatives are of course in addition to TSTT’s ongoing thrust to expand its mobile network. This has led to significant improvements in mobile services and provides increased capacity on the mobile network, while on the
broadband Internet side, the company has expanded 311 office fixed wireless broadband sites which has led to an increase in its customer density on its wireless residential broadband solution. Rural customers and my friend, the Member for Moruga/Tableland will be happy to hear that, because perhaps she is not informed, rural customers who were previously underserved in many areas have seen an immediate benefit as they now have access to the digital world through broadband access with opportunities to work, study and conduct business from the comfort of their homes. [Desk thumping]

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Member, your speaking time is now spent. Okay, so I now recognize the Member for Caroni Central. [Desk thumping]

**Mr. Arnold Ram (Caroni Central):** Thank you, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me as I rise to make my maiden contribution in this august Chamber. I would like to thank the constituents of Caroni Central [Desk thumping] who have reposed trust and confidence in me and given me the opportunity to represent them here today and debate this crucial Appropriation Bill. I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate all Members on either side following the August 10th polls and to say a special thank you to the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Member for Siparia on the nominations I had received earlier.

I would also like to join other Members in congratulating and saluting the SEA students on their success. [Desk thumping] They all deserve many accolades and I wish them well as they proceed in their educational journey. Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia must be applauded for her vision to provide laptops to prepare our students in this digital age. [Desk thumping] Had this been the period of 2010 to 2015 those students would have been rewarded with new brand laptops, Madam Speaker, may I add, brand new “Porsche” laptops, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

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Madam Speaker, there is an old adage that says, a government cannot solve all the problems of a nation, because then there will be no need for a government. Well, Madam Speaker, it looks like the PNM has put their own spin on that saying. Instead they decide that they would solve none of the problems in this country, blame Kamla, blame COVID, and that way they can come year after year, election after election, singing the same song, making the same promises, and never delivering on them. [Desk thumping] Not content with the problems that the citizens of this country already have to deal with on a day to day basis, this PNM Government will invent new problems by any means necessary only to present a soft solution and pretend to be saviours.

Madam Speaker, I would like to touch on sports as very little was raised in the budget statement by the hon. Minister of Finance. The budget statement comprises 142 pages and many paragraphs and we have to traverse to the paragraph at the bottom of page 125 to find out that there has been a proposal to increase the tax allowance from six million to 12 million. The hon. Minister gives the impression that companies are knocking on the ceiling and are willing to provide more support to our sports club and athletes. Under the People’s Partnership Government the tax allowance was 150 per cent for corporate sponsorship. I would employ the Minister of Finance to consider a tiered system of sponsorship and/or tax allowance so that persons or companies willing to donate more can get greater concessions.

3.45 p.m.

According to the Gazette of 9th of September, 2020, Madam Speaker, there is an organization called the Trinidad and Tobago Anti-Doping Organization
falling under the Ministry of Sport and Community Development. Madam Speaker, this organization has the following task and functions: planning, implementing and directing a national anti-doping programme aimed at informing or educating athletes, sport personnel, parents, the media, and the general public in Trinidad and Tobago about anti-doping matters including health consequences of doping, ethical values of sport, nutritional supplements, doping control procedures, consequences of committing an anti-doping rule violation, initiating and supporting rehabilitation programmes for athletes who have used prohibited substances amongst other things.

However, Madam Speaker, I see no provisions on the estimates of the functioning of this organization in the estimates given. The anti-doping bill was brought to Parliament by the People’s Partnership Government and obtained unanimous support from both Houses of Parliament, yet, Madam Speaker, like the Office of the Procurement Regulator, there seems to be a deliberate plan to leave this organization non-operational, or maybe the Minister of Sport and Community Development, the Member for Tobago West, can cast some light later on.

In his budget statement of October 05, 2015—yes, Madam Speaker, it is like déjá vu, same date. The Minister of Finance made the following statement with respect to sport. Madam Speaker, in the 2016 fiscal package and I quote:

“…we are committed to the development of sport and youth. Sport plays an integral part in development personal and collective responsibility, especially for our young people. Unfortunately, in our country”—sport—“has not been mainstreamed. We will put in place plans and programmes to encourage as many citizens as possible to become involved in sport and in recreational activity.”
It goes on to say, Madam Speaker:

“We will establish a sport institute of Trinidad and Tobago mandated to modernize the sports industry with the ultimate objective of developing and promoting sports tourism.”

In the 2017 package, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Sport and Youth Affairs made these promises:

We are well-advanced in the development of the sports policy which will chart and guide sports development over the course of the next decade.

And in the 2018 presentation please, Madam Speaker:

“…we view our sport sector as being vital for contributing to youth and economic development.

We are now positioning sports tourism as a viable incipient industry for economy diversification.”

Madam Speaker, those are the promises of the past five years. Some of the initiatives as outlined by the Minister in his previous statements to this honourable House would have been achieved, but their performance, implementation and execution leaves much to be desired. These are instructive as it shows that they have no plan and they have crashed the economy before COVID.

Madam Speaker, it is our understanding on this side that the Regulated Industries Commission is an independent body established by statute and is mandated to review rates upon application from the utilities, and is not under the authority and/or direction of the Minister of Public Utilities and/or the Minister of Finance. Accordingly, the provisions of the RIC Act, only the appropriate utility service can apply to the RIC for any rate increase for its good and/or service with proper justification and rationalization. I ask this guardedly, Madam Speaker, is the
Government usurping the functions of the RIC? Under section 6 of the Regulated Industries Commission, Chap. 54:73:

“The Commission”—referring to the Regulated Industries Commission—“may have and exercise such functions, powers and duties as are imposed on it by this Act...”

And in particular section 6(d):

“carry out studies of efficiency and economy of operation and of performance by service providers and publish the results thereof;”

6(e) prescribe and publish in the Gazette...in at least one daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago, standards for services;

6(f) monitor service providers and conduct checks to determine their compliance with the standards referred to in paragraph”—before.

“6(h) establish the principles and methodologies by which service providers determine rates for services;

6(i) monitor rates charged by service providers to ensure compliance with the principles...

6(l) investigate complaints by consumers, of their failure to obtain redress from service providers in respect of rates, billings and unsatisfactory service and facilitate relief where necessary;”

6(2), Madam Speaker:

“In the performance of its functions under subsections (1)(e), (g), (h) and (j), the Commission shall consult with service providers and representatives of consumer interest groups and any other parties it considers as having an interest in the matters before it.”

6(3), Madam Speaker:

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“In the performance of its functions, the Commission shall have regard to the public interest and in particular—

(a) to maximize efficiency in the use and allocation of resources to ensure as far as is reasonably practicable, that services are reliable and provided at the lowest possible cost;

(b) to equal access by consumers to service;

(c) to fair treatment of consumers and of service providers similarly placed;

(d) in respect of consumers similarly placed, to non-discrimination in relation to access, pricing and quality service;”

Madam Speaker, there is a role and function of the Regulated Industries Commission and we on this side will do what is necessary to ensure that there is no Government interference in the operation of the RIC and that due process is followed before any impending rate increase, or as the Minister of Finance put it, tariff reviews and impose on the working class and the ordinary people in this country. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, under the PNM, WASA has consistently recorded a loss of pipe borne water supplies of over 50 per cent—50 per cent, Madam Speaker. That is over half the water that they are producing on a daily basis being lost to spillage and leaks. Right now WASA has the capacity to produce 200 million gallons of water per day. So that means over approximately 110 million gallons of water is lost. Can you imagine that 110 million gallons is lost due to the negligence of this Government in dealing with leaks and spillage? And they know that, but yet they have done very little to prevent it.

In fact, the former Minister of Public Utilities in the 2018/2019 budget
indicated that 75 kilometres of pipelines needed to be replaced but funding was allocated to only four kilometres. Yes, you heard that right, Madam Speaker, only four kilometres. The question then arises since funding for vanity projects are made readily available whereas a vital necessity such as water is not given much priority. [Desk thumping] One has to ask why, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, water is not a luxury but a necessity. Under the People’s Partnership Government the population moved from a meagre 18 per cent in 2013 to 69 per cent of those receiving 24/7 water supply. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, I am trying to make sense of unbelievable matter because we in Opposition have always aimed and tried for “Water for all”. To find a solution, I am trying to find the root cause of the issue. So I now keep track of areas without water and I have noticed, Madam Speaker, that it is over half of the geographic land mass of the country that is without a regular supply of water. When you examine the half of the country that is not privy to the consistency of this basic amenity you might be able to find a pattern, Madam Speaker. It appears that sections of the country that consistently have water issues are represented by those sitting alongside me in Opposition today.

Madam Speaker, as I stated once and I repeat again, water is not a luxury but a necessity—a basic necessity. [Desk thumping] It is a foundation of life, without it we cannot live. Why does the Government refused to do any quantifiable thing to address this issue? Five years later and they sit there whilst allowing more than half of our water supply to run into the drains rather than reaching the taps of not only my constituents but other persons in our country. The sad thing about this, Madam Speaker, is that my constituents are paying their bills diligently for this mockery of a water supply. In these times where precautionary COVID-19
measures should be adopted to reduce the transmission of the virus, measures that include the basic washing of our hands, and as medical experts across the globe state, is one of the most effective way to reduce the spread of the virus. My constituency, and I am sure others, are faced with at least seven to 14 days consecutively without water.

So, Madam Speaker, this is a major issue. Taxpayers are paying for a service that never reaches them, and when the money in our country is running out they come here in Parliament to talk about revising the rates and privatization as though they will fix the leaks, but I will revisit this very soon. The Member for Diego Martin North/East boasted about the delivery of electricity in his long three-hour presentation, but not a word about our situation with water and distribution. I do not know, Madam Speaker, is it because they on the other side do not think we have a water problem? Is it that they need to visit my constituents in Caroni Central to first-hand look at what is happening? Because clearly, they do not understand what we are saying on this side. The PNM will come here and talk about WASA is losing money and is becoming inefficient, and they need to restructure, and they need to privatize, and they need to revise the rates, but they cannot even enforce basic asset integrity management of our pipeline infrastructure. They cannot fix the leaks in WASA.

Madam Speaker, so I come back to my point on privatization. Madam Speaker, there has been talk about divesting the assets of WASA and privatizing the operations, and in response to that I want to refer you to the statement made back in 1999 by a former board member of WASA. Madam Speaker during the budget debate on Tuesday, October 19, 1999, in this very House, an Opposition Member then, now Member of this honourable House, stood up and spoke on the
issue of privatization of the distribution of water to citizens of this country.

In 1999, Madam Speaker, the UNC government led by Mr. Basdeo Panday was engaging with a privately-owned company call Desalcott to purchase desalinated water to tend to the needs of the Point Lisas Industrial Estate and environs, which would have freed up the supply from WASA to go to the residential customers. Madam Speaker, today Desalcott provides 40 million gallons of water per today to the Point Lisas Industrial Estate and in surrounding areas [Desk thumping] but the PNM has a problem with that management and arrangement. As you will see a team showing up, Madam Speaker, that whenever a service provider is out performing a Government entity, this PNM administration will be opposed to it because they want the country to believe that proper delivery of service are out of our reach so that when they do not deliver we do not have anything to compare them to.

Madam Speaker, in 1999 the Member for Diego Martin West knew all too well the problems associated with the leakage that WASA experiences. On page 363 of the Hansard dated October 19, 1999, the Member admitted proudly and I quote:

“Mr. Speaker, when I was on WASA Board, a study was done on the leak situation and because of the age of a lot of our transmission and distribution lines—in some areas the leak was a high as 57 per cent. Everybody knows that what WASA has to do was to change these old mains, and for every main you change, the water you are producing, more of it will get to its customers. So, as we are producing”—155—“million gallons today, the convention of wisdom is, at least 1/3 of that is leaking.”

The Member then went on to say:
“Mr. Speaker, look at”—this map—“here”—and I assume he was displaying some map to the House, Madam Speaker.

He said:

“You can see from where you sit. Do you see that blue area here? That is the potential reservoir that can be created on the edge of the Caroni Swamp with a potential yield of over 200 million gallons. Do you know why? Because that is where the Cunupia River, the Caroni River and Bejucal drain. They all end up pouring their fresh water into there. In fact, when we were about to build the Caroni/Arena Dam, there were two options available at the time. One was the Caroni/Arena Dam, the other was called the White Proposal.”

Still reading from *Hansard* he said:

“We have a current production of 146 million gallons per person, so the problem is not production, the problem is transmission and distribution. Everybody knows that in the country.”

That was the Member for Diego Martin West, Madam Speaker, 21 years ago in this House, talking about how everybody in this country, including himself, knew that leakages were the problem. The Member said he was studying the problems since the 1980s when he sat on the board of WASA, but yet as Prime Minister for five years he could not rectify the problem.

Madam Speaker, there is a simple but profound proverb, “There is a difference between giving-up and strategic disengagement”. The Member knew everything when he sat in Opposition 20 years ago. He knew the problems and he knew the solutions. Everything he knew, Madam Speaker, but the minute he became Prime Minister he strategically forgot. [*Desk thumping*] So when the constituents, and my constituents, and the rest of the country who are hard-up for a
regular supply of water ask the question about their water woes, Madam Speaker, I want them to know that it is the Prime Minister who knows exactly what has to be done about their situation and we can only hope and pray that he will do something about their plight very soon.

Madam Speaker, as I turn my attention it was troubling to note coming to Parliament and looking at the financial statement of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the first time that tens of millions of uncollected debt revenue has been allowed to be written off by this Government since 2015. For a Government that insists on taxing the poor and working-class citizens you would think they would be just as eager to collect this revenue from the various telecommunication companies operating in our country, but yet every year for the past five years consistently close to $5 million in unpaid debt has been underwritten by TATT and is allowed to go uncollected, and I hope that the Minister would explain this in his wrapping up.

Madam Speaker, for those keeping abreast of the ongoing fiasco between the Ministry of National Security and TSTT with regard to the installation and management of a CCTV system that was procured by this Government in 2016 through a tendering process, at this moment there is still uncertainty by all the parties about how much money is actually owed and when the Government intends to pay the debt. If you were to take the word of the head of the Communication Workers’ Union, Madam Speaker, the debt owed by the Government ranges anywhere between 500 million to $1 billion. Madam Speaker, that was in 2016. A service that was procured in 2016 and yet has still has not been paid, and yet they want to come and blame the state of the economy on COVID, something they should have budgeted for since then.
But the Government would have us believe that it is in fact less after they did their own calculations. Imagine that the contract was signed between the Government and TSTT for a fixed sum, and after the contract expired and a new round of bidding commenced the Government wants to retroactively the price on the ordinary contract and pay the service provider less. Have you ever heard of contracts working like that, Madam Speaker? But this is not the only suspect financial negotiation taking place at TSTT.

In 2017, the board of TSTT took it upon themselves to approve the purchase of Massy Communications to the tune of $225 million after the company went bankrupt. Two hundred and fifty-five million dollars, Madam Speaker, the board met on it and decided to purchase Massy Communications and it was only when the deal was reported by the local media did the public and the people of this country find out about the decision. You could imagine that? A state-owned company spends $255 million on a whim and the people have to read about it in the newspaper. That is accountability and transparency for you, Madam Speaker. When it was brought up in the Public Accounts Committee for state enterprises, the chairman of TSTT at the time said plainly, “They, the Government, read it in the newspaper. This was an operational decision to acquire assets which we would normally have built out ourselves.”

So the board of directors acted upon its mandate. That was their mandate, Madam Speaker, to bail out a company in bankruptcy. It sounds very familiar to the bail out of Grand Bay in the sum of US $5 million, TT $30 million, back in 2015. And that mandate was so strong that they did not even send a hint or a text message to the Minister to give him a heads up about the purchase. They mandated it and they bought it. Fine! But where did the $255 million come from, Madam
Speaker? Well, I will tell you where it came from. At the same time they were buying up assets of Massy Communications, the board of TSTT was setting out their five-year strategic plant and deciding the future of the company but they needed capital. Where did this capital come from, Madam Speaker? Well to finance their plans for the next five years they had to go to the bank for loans amounting to $1.9 billion which they received in three tranches.

Listen to this, Madam Speaker. The first two tranches they received from Republic Bank in the form of drawdowns of $1 billion with interest rates of 6 per cent over 10 years, and 500 million with interest of 5.5 per cent over five years. Those were the first two tranches and the interest they would accumulate would be over $400 million over a 10-year period. But what about the other 400 million? Well that is where it gets interesting. For the final 400 million they went to JMMB and JMMB, as any responsible institution would, conducted a valuation of TSTT in order to process the terms of the bond. I have with me a copy of that valuation report from JMMB which I would like to quote here in Parliament for it to be recorded on *Hansard* so the citizens of this country will know exactly what is going on with TSTT and their taxpayer dollar. [Desk thumping]

Now this valuation report was conducted in October 2019, one year ago, and that is what they have to say about the financial state of TSTT. They said:

For the fiscal year ended March 31, 2019, TSTT reported a loss after tax of 1.1 billion, the second consecutive annual loss. This loss was driven by a 7 per cent decline in revenue as well as lines of revenue reported declines in fiscal year. The decrease was primarily attributed to decreases in revenues from enterprise solution and residential services. Cost of goods sold also declined by 5.8 per cent.
As a result, the company was unable to maintain its gross profit margin of 82.8 per cent relatively unchanged from the prior year. The decrease was mainly due to a decrease in mobile services, cost of sales which was primarily due to a 35.2 per cent decrease in the number of mobile devices sold in financial year 2019 as compared to financial year 2018.

At the time this information was gathered and reported on by JMMB, Madam Speaker, you might recall that TSTT was delaying the publishing of these financial statements because of the unpaid debt still owed by Government. So while the people of this country might not have known at the time, the Government themselves might not have known, seeing how little interest they have paid to TSTT and their financials, JMMB had reported the loss and used that information to guide their loan arrangements. The fact of the matter is that the revenue growth of TSTT has declined significantly since 2015, when the PNM took office, and that possesses a significant risk to any financial institution looking to do business with TSTT. And that is why in the recommendations by JMMB in issuing the loan, they state the following, Madam Speaker:

“• TSTT faces strong competition in all the segments in which it operates and their market share in most of these segments have been under declined.
• Given the high penetration rates in the sector and the small geographic market in which they operate, TSTT’s revenue will be constrained.
• TSTT may not be able to generate cash flows to make principal payments without assistance from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago or though refinancing.”

Might be global financing, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Let me repeat—
Madam Speaker: Member, in terms of that last comment, I will ask you to withdraw that last comment please.

Mr. A. Ram: I respectfully withdraw, Madam Speaker. I was talking global—

Madam Speaker: I ask you to withdraw. You withdraw and please continue.

Mr. A. Ram: Let me repeat that final point, Madam Speaker, so anyone who has not heard or may have been opening their refrigerator.

“TSTT may not be able to generate the cash flows to make principal payments without assistance from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago or through refinancing.”

Madam Speaker, let me remind you and this House that JMMB’s portfolio was the smallest out of the three tranches of loans acquired by TSTT, and they are concerned about TSTT’s revenue generation and whether or not they will be able to make principal payments without Government assistance. And if JMMB had those concerns, and if those concerns are correct, then that means TSTT may encounter a similar issue when it comes to repaying Republic Bank as well. That is 1.9 billion plus interest, Madam Speaker, that the citizens of this country will have to pay if TSTT continues on its downward trajectory under the PNM, and let me remind you that all these actions took place under the PNM board.

When the board went to the Minister with their plans to borrow this 1.9 billion they did not seek approval, Madam Speaker. According to them they simply had to ask for something called a non-objection letter from the Minister and apparently he gave it freely, and why would he not? The Minister appears to have no objections to anything going on at TSTT so why would he object. Just like when they bailed out Massy Communications, Madam Speaker, the TSTT board took it upon themselves to borrow and spend money wildly, giving themselves
mandate without rhyme or reason, and in the end the citizens of this country who will have to bail them out.

Madam Speaker, it is unacceptable that the behaviour of the PNM in allowing the board of TSTT to get away with all and the people know little about it. The only thing I wait on now, Madam Speaker, is to hear that the board of TSTT might have to invest in a sou-sou to find money to pay back the debt when it matures. [Desk thumping] Talking about sou-sou, Madam Speaker, you know everybody I talk to telling me about their anxieties when it and come to the property tax and where they are going to find moneys in these uncertain economic times. And when I saw Errol Fabien last week in the news and a bank looking to repossess his house, I realized that it is only a precursor to what might actually happen when a Government finally enacts their version of a property tax in this country.

Look at the state of an economy, Madam Speaker. So many businesses have closed down. Yesterday we had Caribbean Cinemas or rather MovieTowne closing in Chaguanas. Not just the big ones that we hear about in the news, but all of the small and medium-sized businesses like haberdasheries, bars, restaurants, all of these places closing their doors and sending home their employees, and I wonder where they are going to find this lump sum amount of money to pay property tax when they are struggling to find their next meal. Then I think about how appealing a sou-sou type pyramid scheme might look too many of these people who might just be looking for a way to save their properties from being repossessed by the State.

4.15 p.m.

And we have seen the problems these people get into when the pyramid

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collapses and they cannot recover their money, but that is what the Government is
driving people towards, all these taxes and raising the cost of living. But the
Government is just looking for ways to increase their revenue with no care about
where people find their money and that is something that needs to be addressed
before we send more people into a sou-sou and bankruptcy.

But the Government themselves in the budget looked like they might be
investing in a sou-sou with an overall deficit of $8 billion. These are just
preliminary figures, Madam Speaker, and if we are to take the comments by a
former PNM Minister of Finance, the price on which the budget is hedged for both
oil and gas is a bit high and some of the terms explained there might be
unparliamentary for me to repeat here but I implore my colleagues, the Members
opposite, to have a look at that interview.

While public utilities might not be as bad as others, Ministries like
agriculture are budgeted for half a billion-dollar deficit at the time when they are
now looking to diversify the industry, whatever that means. Diversification is just a
big word that nobody really knows what it means according to some.

And really in his budget presentation, the Minister of Finance gave little or
no details of where the money is coming from or how the Government intends to
spend it. Most of the time he spent repeating the same old, rejected, recycled
promises by the PNM since 2015, but the people of this country have not
received—and it begs the question, Madam Speaker, if the Government could not
deliver on those promises in the past five years, how can they expect to deliver
now that the country is in the state that it is in today and they are just fooling the
people with promises like they did in the past five years with no intention of
delivering once.

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Because I tell you, Madam Speaker, there are constituents of mine who have told me that all the money spent in the past five years and all of the promises made, the only thing they have received from this Government is a light bulb and with the increase in taxation at this time, it is a joke for the Government to tell people that those light bulbs were free. Madam Speaker, how much time do I have again, please?

Madam Speaker: Your time expires at 4.26.43.

Mr. A. Ram: Thank you, Madam Speaker. But while we are on the topic of light bulbs, Madam Speaker, I would like to suggest to the House, there is a measure for the Government to introduce that might be able to alleviate the electricity woes that so many have been facing whilst also generating revenue for private individuals. As the world moves towards green energy and especially solar power in particular, Madam Speaker, countries have been looking for new and innovative ways to harvest solar powers in quantities large enough to facilitate their population but economic enough to compete with fossil fuels.

To this end, something that has been developed is called a grid tie inverter which allows persons with personal solar panels attached to their homes to sell excess amounts of electricity which they generate to the power generation company. What this will encourage is for people to adopt solar panels for their own personal consumption as well as generate revenue for themselves by selling off the excess. Countries like USA, UK and India are already taking advantage of this new technology and it is allowing them to not only generate more electricity but also allow their citizens to earn some extra cash as their economies struggle to recover from the global pandemic. And this is the type of innovative thinking that our own citizens can benefit from if the Government is willing to be open to it. I tell you,
Madam Speaker, I was conducting an online consultation regarding this very same budget when in the middle of the presentation, there was a power outage and this is an issue that is common to many parts.

Madam Speaker, with that, I would like to end my contribution here this evening. I thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this debate and I thank the Leader of the Opposition and my constituents for giving me the opportunity to represent them in this Parliament. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Okay, so I may firstly congratulate the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West on his maiden contribution [Desk thumping] and I also congratulate the Member for Caroni Central on his maiden contribution. [Desk thumping]

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to join this debate. [Desk thumping] I want to first congratulate the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning for this well-crafted, well-thought-out and innovative budget in difficult times. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, allow me also to thank the constituency of St Ann’s East for their support of me as their MP for another five-year term. [Desk thumping] I also want to offer my thanks to the Prime Minister for the opportunity to serve on his management team as the Minister of Education [Desk thumping] in this critical time of the world’s history.

Madam Speaker, as I begin, I think it is very important sometimes to set a record straight and therefore, I must, I am compelled to deal with some of the matters raised by the previous speakers. So when I heard the Member for
Moruga/Tableland refer to no water in any area of Trinidad and Tobago, that brings me great concern because it says to me that that Member, new as the Member may be, does not remember which Government was always speaking about “Water for all” and to hear a Member of the UNC speak about no water in any part of this country, it means that the irony clearly has escaped the Member for Moruga/Tableland. [Desk thumping]

It is typical of the UNC, Madam Speaker, to exhibit their disdain for Trinidad and Tobago by down-crying our proudest moments. The Carifesta, up to last week, was given accolades by members of the region and yet still in Trinidad and Tobago, it is the UNC that consistently tries to bring down one of our finest moments. It is truly a crying shame. Not a solution, just empty baseless criticism and that is how the UNC operates from top to bottom. [Desk thumping] That is just the way they do business and that is why in the main, the country would have rejected the UNC and their depressing rhetoric. [Desk thumping] And while they continue to cry down the sky, the PNM continues to work, to do the work to steer this ship and steer it like no other party can. [Desk thumping] Thank God for the PNM and for the education that allows our citizens to make the right choice. [Desk thumping]

Imagine my surprise and consternation to hear the contribution and some of the points raised by the Member who just preceded me. I can say of my colleagues on this side of the House that none of us has been brought here under a cloud of misconduct of any serious nature dating back quite to 2013, none of us on this side, and then has the temerity and unmitigated gall to stand in this honourable House and speak about accountability and transparency. To turn whistle-blower on the Parliament floor in a misguided attempt to clear a name associated with
misconduct since their days—

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, may I just raise Standing Order 48(8) in terms of raising the conduct of a Member of this House except on matters of a substantive motion, please?

Madam Speaker: Overruled. Please continue.

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: It is appalling to hear that being raised in this honourable House when there are other allegations swirling all around and to hear a Member stand here to raise those concerns. This is not the calibre of the Members on this side of the House, on this management team chosen by our hon. Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley, [Desk thumping] and that is why this country knew very well, according to my colleague from Laventille West, where barley and balisier grow and that is why the PNM sits on this side of the House and will continue to steer this ship according to the honourable traditions of the House and this country.

I listened to the Member for Moruga/Tableland, the Member for Barataria/San Juan, the Member for Princes Town and I thought how wonderful it must be to simply stand and wave your hands and say that is wrong and this is wrong and to almost gleefully rub your hands and point these things out without an iota of thought deeper than the thumps on the desk by your colleagues. [Desk thumping] No solutions, no deep thought, only gleeful joy in what they perceive is wrong and crying down the sky. But we in the PNM do not have that luxury. We have been given a mandate by the people of Trinidad and Tobago to steer this country right and to do the work that is required to lead Trinidad and Tobago on the path to progress. Our citizens made the right choice so allow me now to move swiftly along to deal with the work of the Ministry of Education.
Madam Speaker, the vision of the Ministry of Education is quality, equitable, holistic education for all learners and the education sector in Trinidad and Tobago is facing a most difficult challenge. The most difficult challenge probably in recent history and that is teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Allow me to just give some historical context so that we understand how we have ended up in this situation and what has been done from that time to now.

Our total student population in Trinidad and Tobago is approximately 200,000 with a teacher population of just around 16,000, covering ECCE, primary and secondary schools. We have 477 public primary schools, 134 public secondary schools, 208 government and government-assisted ECCE centres and more than 439 private ECCE centres. Schools were closed in Trinidad and Tobago to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on March 16, 2020. This is unprecedented, at least in recent times. The SEA, CSEC and CAPE examinations were postponed while tertiary level institutions conducted their examinations online. The dates for the SEA and the start date for the modified CSEC and CAPE exams were consulted and agreed upon as August the 20th and July 13th respectively. Schools received the necessary physical preparations and equipment for students to attend examination classes in preparation for their exams.

On July the 13th, students began writing the CXC examinations and on Monday, July 20, 2020, over 19,000 SEA students resumed classes at primary schools. However, SEA classes which were carded to continue up until the date of the exam which would have been August 20th, were halted on August 5th due to the trajectory of the spread of COVID-19 in Trinidad and Tobago. The SEA examination was administered on August 20th as planned, the results of which were

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The new school term began on September 01, 2020 and teaching and learning began in the main between September 7th and 14th. The results of the modified CXC examinations were released on Tuesday 22 September, and students are now in the process of matriculating into tertiary institutions and Form 6 classes. Our Form 1 students are now in the process of registering at their new schools and should be well on their way to settling into their classes by October the 19th.

With respect to term one 2020/21, and this is the term we are presently engaged in, Madam Speaker, this is a historical term because this term, our students are engaged in remote learning or home-based learning. It is an extremely challenging time for all education stakeholders: parents, teachers, students, administrators, policymakers, the staff of the Ministry of Education. All stakeholders are challenged in this time but we are not alone in this struggle.

Between March to April 2020, 188 of the 195 countries of the world closed schools. So that is 96 per cent of the countries of the world were faced with school closure in the middle of a term and the uncertainty of when schools would reopen. That affected 1.6 billion learners around the world. Governments and education stakeholders would have reacted swiftly to ensure the continuity of learning. Ninety per cent of countries adopted a mixture of online and broadcast methods to ensure that children received education.

However, even with that combination, only 69 per cent of school children globally could have been reached. Thirty-one per cent of school children worldwide—and that is 463 million children—cannot be reached by the broadcast and Internet-based remote learning process. Eighty-three per cent of countries used the online method reaching 25 per cent of school children worldwide. Television
has the potential to reach 62 per cent globally; radio, 16 per cent, and
approximately 40 per cent of countries had to use print-based packaged materials
to reach those not available by online or broadcast media.

As of October 2020, there are still physically closed schools in 39 countries
worldwide and this accounts for 50 per cent of the world’s children. This global
context is very important for us to understand and contextualize our situation in
Trinidad and Tobago because sometimes we tend to feel as though we are isolated
from the rest of the world and the issues that we are facing are not the issues of the
world.

In response to this physical school closure, the Ministry of Education of
Trinidad and Tobago between March and August 2020, provided access to its
learning management system, its LMS, and that allowed teachers to upload
lessons, conduct live video sessions and interact with students online. Indeed,
when this happened, because of the number of students, that system would have
had to go a number of upgrades to be able to take the load of the number of
students and teachers and parents that were accessing it at the time.

SEA math and grammar were broadcast on television and over a thousand
subject specific learning materials were uploaded to the learning management
system for use by schools. At that time, training for teachers also began in
collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning. Many schools during this
period, Madam Speaker, were able to start that remote and home-based learning,
catch their footing and interact and engage their students.

Our current situation, Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education is focused
on providing the framework for home-based learning; providing teachers and
students with suitable devices, training and resources for home-based learning;
sourcing funding for the provision of e-books and other online resources for students; providing a robust LMS, learning management system, for the use by students, parents, teachers, administrators and policymakers and designing the framework for blended learning and the integration of technology into the curriculum so that the gains made over this most difficult time become a permanent feature of the education system.

In September 2020, 176,000 students were expected to engage in teaching and learning activities, whether through online or printed packages. Based on our weekly analysis of the daily attendance data and the trends, 90 per cent of these students are engaged in online classes at this time with the other 10 per cent collecting packaged work, whether it is hard copy or by electronic means.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the teachers and the parents for their very hard work in monitoring, preparing and guiding our students during this term. It has not been easy. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, I speak as a parent myself and I understand what it takes to help our students through this time and we truly are all in this together. Parents have stepped up, teachers have stepped up. They have begun their upskilling process and they are meeting the challenges of this time.

The Ministry of Education, following the best practice approach of using multiple platforms to deliver curricula, has provided resource materials via the learning management system suitable for use in the online environment or in the printed packages. The Ministry of Education has provided content for all levels and subject areas of the primary school curriculum, not just SEA and that is actively being created and loaded on to the LMS as well as shown in partnership with TTT on both Channel 4 as well as all of the major cable providers so that it is broadcast
to every area of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Ministry of Education has provided weekly pull-outs in the print media with content suitable for infants as well as ECCE students. The Ministry of Education has provided daily radio features for ECCE students and that is ongoing. Guidelines for the operation of schools and a reduced curriculum for this term have been distributed to teachers and administrators. Between March 17 and October 16, 2020, 34 different online training courses for teachers, guidance counsellors, and administrators and some courses have been available for parents and students, these have been offered to allow teachers, parents and students to get used to what is happening now and to upskill where the upskilling is needed.

And let me just mention some of these courses. Some being offered in multiple cohorts to cover all of the teachers that need to access them:

- How to teach and learn online from home.
- Integration of technology and pedagogy.
- Cyber security training for teachers.
- Designing online tools for special-needs students.
- Supporting children with difficulties in reading and writings.
- Music education for teachers.
- Helping my children with Microsoft 365 and Teams.
- Security in an online classroom environment.
- Accessing and navigating Google Classroom.
- Consideration for preparation of printed instruction.

And that is just a sample of what has been and is currently being offered to our teachers in order to navigate this upskilling process that is necessary in this present
time. And I can tell you that our teachers have grabbed the opportunities with both hands. These courses have been oversubscribed. In some cases, we have had to add on additional cohorts just to meet the demand. So our teachers are reaching out and taking hold of the opportunities that are offered to be able to assist our students in this critical time and for that, we are grateful and we thank them.

The Ministry of Education has focused on equipping students and teachers for the virtual learning platform. All teachers who indicated a need have been given laptops and also the students at our public special schools, those children with special needs, and that has seen us distribute over 5,000 devices in that space.

There is also the provision in budget 2020/21 of almost $100 million set aside for providing devices for our children and connectivity devices because they go hand in hand. They must have the device and they must have the connectivity. The Adopt-A-School Programme, the Ministry has pledges of over 17,000 devices for children. These devices have begun to arrive and are now being distributed around the country to the children. And I want to take this opportunity to thank the corporate sector for their response to this call by the Ministry of Education. [Desk thumping] This has seen an estimated value of $50 million donated through the corporate sector directly as an investment into the children of Trinidad and Tobago. This, Madam Speaker, is extremely commendable.

The equipping of schools for virtual learning, connectivity issues, and you would have heard the Minister of Public Utilities speak to this issue of providing connectivity through Bmobile and the Minister of Public Administration is also deeply involved in this so that packages for students are being offered as well as the connectivity in the schools, especially the primary schools, making sure that these schools are equipped with connectivity so the students who have their
devices will be able to connect when they come back out into the blended environment.

So I want to make it very clear that it is not simply the provision of devices. The devices themselves are necessary but are not sufficient for the integration of ICT and the type of learning and the transformation of the education sector that we expect to see. So therefore, when I keep hearing this argument coming from the other side about “laptops” and “laptops” and “if they did not stop the laptop programme”, providing overpriced laptops to students, especially when they were not up to standard, substandard and overpriced laptops to students, is not a necessary and sufficient condition for the provision and the transformation of the education sector. [Desk thumping] It is a package. It is the devices, it is the connectivity, it is also the upskilling of the teachers. It is the actual blending of the curriculum with ICT brought into it. These are all of the things, all of the factors that go into transformation of an education system. So just crying “yuh shouldna stop de laptop, yuh shouldna stop de laptop”, it is not about laptop contracts, it is about the learning of our children. [Desk thumping] It is about ensuring that they have the best opportunity in this world that we now live in. So therefore, it is a package that goes together and that is what the Ministry of Education is actively addressing at this time.

With respect to the learning resources that are available, the finalization of plans for e-books, that funding has already been sourced and so that is moving ahead swiftly.

The importance of a well-built-out and optimized learning management system, this is very critical. The learning management system and making sure that it is robust to allow for data gathering, to allow for the students to be able to access
material that is organized in terms of forms and levels and standards and subjects, that is a mammoth project that has to be undertaken. The management system is already built out, however there is room now for optimization and a committee will be organized in short order, Madam Speaker, to make recommendations and assess the learning management system of the Ministry of Education so that we can move now to ensuring that it meets the needs of all of our learners, our parents, our teachers, our students and it also meets the data gathering needs that are very critical for the Ministry of Education to guide the policies.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education in 2016 would have engaged in some consultations with respect to the direction of the education sector, however, out of that would have come the recommendations for more focused consultations on some specific areas that are very important. So for example, the curriculum and the reform of that curriculum, the widening, the broadening and how we shape that for the modern day, that needs further elucidation. The process of the SEA, that also is a very important topic that we need to seek national opinion on. The Concordat and how it operates in Trinidad and Tobago. The Teaching Service Commission. These are all areas that would have been identified for further and deeper consultation and that will be undertaken in the very near future. By the end of the year, we will be hearing more about those consultations and therefore we will be looking forward to the reports and what that will bring and how we will move forward in this education sector.

The importance of these national decisions on the provision of quality, holistic and equitable education to produce the model T&T citizen cannot be understated. And when I say the model T&T citizen, Madam Speaker, this is what the education system is designed to produce. When we put our children into this
system, what we should produce at the end, what should come out is a citizen that has certain qualities. A citizen that can contribute to our country in certain ways.

We want citizens that know the true history of Trinidad and Tobago. We want citizens that understand the governance structure of this country, that appreciate and value the unique cultural nuisances of Trinidad and Tobago. We want citizens who understand and are tolerant of the different religions and ideologies present in this country. We want citizens who understand the importance of performing one’s civic duty. We want citizens who exhibit moral and ethical behaviours, trustworthiness, respect, fairness, honesty and courtesy. We want citizens who take pride in the quality of their work. We want citizens with strong work ethics. We want citizens who are digital natives, who are active patriots, who love and will build their country.

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We want citizens who are law-abiding and who exhibit health-consciousness. This is the type of citizen the education system would want to create and therefore the education system has to select for that. We have to train our citizens in everything we do to produce this type of citizen. If there was ever a time for Trinidad and Tobago as a nation to take stock of the type of citizen we are producing, that time is now. [Desk thumping]

And if there was ever a time for Trinidad and Tobago to take stock of the problem of our missing students, that time is now. 2020 has been a year that has unmasked many of the weaknesses of our processes and the room for improvement of many of the processes of Trinidad and Tobago. This is a time where we have to take the opportunity to improve.

And that issue of students who are on the register but not in the classroom
has been with us for many years and that is something that the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of National Security, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, we have to address it and face it squarely. Because some of these students may be missing from the classroom but we find them in other places where we do not want to find them. And this is something that the Ministry of Education will be in discussion with the other Ministries to deal with. Because as a country it is now an issue that must be faced.

The Ministry of Education is working and I want to thank the PS, the staff of the Ministry for their sterling efforts thus far in a challenging and difficult time, and I want to thank them in advance for what is to come because we have much work to do and we have to do it quickly and effectively as we strive to achieve the goals of the Ministry of Education: no learner left online, the establishment of a safety net to catch the students who may be at risk of falling off the grid, the transformation of the education sector to produce citizens which meet the requirements of the digital workplace and the digital economy.

Madam Speaker, allow me to turn my attention now to my constituency of St. Ann’s East, and again to thank them for their support and their confidence in me as their MP for another term. It is truly a privilege to serve my constituents.

During the COVID-19 period we would have gone through a difficult time, the whole country and the entire world. I want to thank my constituents, some of them who were so gracious in their efforts towards their fellow constituents who needed the help. I want to thank them because during that time, when the constituents needed me most, we were able as a constituency to offer over 1,500 hampers to those in need over that time and that only came out of the generosity of our business community in St. Ann's East and I thank them for that, and that
appropriation (Financial Year 2021)  
Bill, 2020 (cont’d)  
Hon. Dr. N Gadsby-Dolly (cont’d)

continues up to today. We still continue to help our constituents, those who need it.

During this term, the St. Ann's East constituency office has already been able to assist with devices, so that our students would be able to benefit from that even as the Government moves to deal with this issue and to ensure that our children are not left offline.

And I want to offer a word to the new Member for Barataria/San Juan. Hon. Member, when you help, help from the heart. Do not help people [Desk thumping] and do it with a view of coming to this august House and beating your chest, “I help people from a different constituency”. Every Member here knows that people come to your office for help. To them, it does not even matter if you are their MP. You are an honourable Member of this House and they come to you for help, [Desk thumping] and when they come for help, it is not for us to come here and to say, “ah help people who are not from my area”. We have taken an oath to help everyone we can, and every Member here does that. [Desk thumping] I want to also tell them what your right hand does, do not let your left hand know. That is not honourable behaviour, hon. Member.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan, do you intend to make an interruption? Please continue.

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: As we go along this journey of service we will all learn what it means to be the bigger person and help all that we can.

And I want to apologize if any members of my constituency might have felt belittled by that, I want to apologize to them and to encourage them to, as you are accustomed, WhatsApp your MP, and whatever help I can assist with, of course I will. And to the members of the surrounding areas around my constituency office that really is very close to Barataria/San Juan, I want to encourage them, you can

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continue to come to my office. That is not a problem because we help. We on this side, we help whoever comes to us for help. [Desk thumping]

Last term we saw a great deal of St. Ann's East progress. The Gasparillo Community Centre was opened. Cantaro and La Pastora Community Centres were constructed and opened. We had some other community centres in Febeau, Bourg Mulatresse that underwent some needed refurbishment. The Brian Lara Recreational Ground was opened. We repaired a major river wall in the Sam Boucaud area that caused a lot of flooding at that time. The beach facilities at Maracas and Las Cuevas Bay had major upgrade works done. Some major road works took place Farrell Hill, Bourg Mulatresse, Las Cuevas, Sou Sou Lands in Febeau Village, Cross Winds Boulevard in La Pastora. The Saddle Road itself, and we want to thank the Ministry of Works and Transport for this because there was a perennial problem of flooding in the Hololo area and we have seen that the extensive work taking place there has allowed this to really be alleviated and we thank them for that. This is about 20 years in coming.

And as we speak, roadwork and drainage on Las Cuevas Road in El Luengo Village, Maracas Valley is under way. The area of great concern on the Santa Cruz Old Road, that has been repaved. The roadway on Blanc Street in Bourg Mulatresse, that has been completed. The residents of Baines Avenue and Concord, they have had that river dredged and the embankment repaired. So they are very happy and feeling a lot more secure. The residents of La Canoa and Febeau Village, they have made a special plea to continue the river works and the cleaning of that river in that area. They have had that done in recent time and it has been very advantageous to them.

I want to thank the CEPEP and URP teams who are coming out and ensuring
that the area is maintained, that has really redounded to the benefit of St. Ann's East. And I want to mention to my constituents that I hear your concerns about some of the things that still have to be done, the work in progress in St. Ann's East, and I want to assure you that I have heard your concerns about opening the ECCE centre in Maracas Valley, the refurbishment of the Maracas Bay Community Centre, the pavilion in Las Cuevas, the paving of agricultural roads in Hobal Extension, Pepper Village, Upper Las Cuevas Road and El Tucuche Road, Labaja Extension Road and all of the different roads that have been identified to me as MP as roads that need attention.

I want to let the residents of Maracas Valley know that I have been making representation for the paving of the Maracas Royal Road and we know that all of these things will come into fruition very soon and we want to tell them that your MP is making your representation on your behalf for all of those things to be done. [Desk thumping]

So I want to tell my constituents that we know that we have been getting work done. The St. Ann's East progress is taking place. Life is better in St. Ann's East. We are #saeproud because we know that a lot of work is taking place, and not only in the infrastructural side but also on the human side. So, for example, the competition for our children, the online competition, poetry competition, that is now ongoing.

The seminar for our students with special needs, that is coming up next Saturday. So, therefore, your MP is looking out for you; not just your physical needs but also your human and social needs. Our hamper drive is ongoing. So, yes life is better in St. Ann's East and your MP is there looking out for the needs of my constituents who would have reposed their confidence in me as Member of
Parliament.

Madam Speaker, again grateful for this opportunity. Thank you for being able to contribute in this way.

Ms. Anita Haynes (Tabaquite): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to respond in this budget debate for fiscal 2021. Before I get into the substance of my contribution, allow me a few moments to just reflect on how surreal the last few moments in this debate have been.

Madam Speaker, we had a Minister of Public Utilities come here to tell us that they run things, but cannot tell us why we do not have running water. All sorts of talk and no action by that Minister. [Desk thumping] We had a Minister of youth affairs come and tell us about youth activities and all sorts of youth things, but not a youth in sight to speak on behalf of the youths in the People's National Movement. The only thing that became clear after Minister Hinds spoke is that he was a youth a very long time ago and is out of touch with what young people need in this country. And then, Madam Speaker, we had a Minister of Education come to tell us it is not about laptops but is on TV asking people to donate laptops; make it make sense, Madam Speaker.

You know, Madam Speaker, I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the constituents of Tabaquite. I am humbled and proud to stand in this Chamber and represent the people in the constituency of my birth. Madam Speaker, I stand here as the first female Member of Parliament for Tabaquite and the youngest Member of Parliament for Tabaquite. [Desk thumping] And this is based on the vision of a political leader intent on changing the political landscape in Trinidad and Tobago, intent on a focus on representation.

And this gets me to the next point. Madam Speaker, the Minister of
Education would have done well to tell my colleague from Barataria/San Juan, “thank you”. Because during the COVID pandemic I have messages on my phone saying that the constituency office in that area had the wrong phone numbers and they could not get in touch with their Member of Parliament. That is why they were by the Bararatia/San Juan office, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping]

So, yes, we could all be in this together, if you can just find the humility to say thank you instead of chastising my colleague.

Madam Speaker, on Thursday, October 15th, we will celebrate the International Day of Rural Women, and I wish to read into the record a statement from the United Nations:

“Structural barriers and discriminatory social norms continue to constrain women’s decision-making power and political participation in rural households and communities...equal access to productive resources and assets, public services, such as education and health care, and infrastructure, including water and sanitation...”

—will make an untold difference to this population.

I raise this today, Madam Speaker, because as I stand here as Member of Parliament for Tabaquite, appointed as a shadow Minister in education and energy. I also stand as a young woman, a proud product of a rural community, Piparo.

Madam Speaker, when I heard the Minister of Education talk about access and connectivity, and I marry that with what the Minister of Finance said, which was a conversation on Mi-Fi to increase connectivity, I have to ask: Why are you ignoring rural communities in this country? When the Member of Parliament for Moruga/Tableland came here to say that there was no connectivity, she is not making that up, you know, Madam Speaker, it is a fact that if you bring in this Mi-
Fi service, if you do not have 3G and 4G it will not work. So these students are still going to be left out.

Madam Speaker, when we speak about structural barriers, I have to stand here and ask, on behalf of, not only my constituents but my generation that equal access to quality education must be a priority of every government. And so we must ask that these laptops that you are asking donations for, are they being distributed equitably? Are we sure, Madam Speaker, that the students who are most in need are the recipients of these devices? Because that is the question we have to answer.

When I stand here today, Madam Speaker, my points on education come from a space where I truly believe that this is the sector that is the catalyst for positive change in our country. It is the only sector that can absolutely change our future if we invest wisely and we see value for money. And if we have a Minister that will not just do the talking but do the actual working in that Ministry. [Desk thumping]

The Minister spoke today for 45 minutes and never, not once mentioned the CSEC and CAPE students who are still grappling with the injustice that they faced this year. [Desk thumping] And so when I stand here, when I write on their behalf, it is because I understand that education is a passport, it is an attempt to get a better life and to secure a better future, and you have students who worked incredibly hard, who may not be able to afford to query the results and you have a Ministry that is ignoring their plight. Both Ministers have spoken in this House so far. Neither of them saw it fit to address a generation of Trinidadians and Tobagonians.

Madam Minister of Education said that it was easy for us to look on. I assure you, I assure you it is not easy to face the thousands of students coming to all of
our offices asking for an opportunity to learn. It is not easy to look at parents who
wish and hope that they would be able to provide an opportunity for their children
to come out of the circumstances that they are in right now.

Madam Speaker, parents have come into my office. They were told that if
you have WhatsApp on your phone, you cannot access the printed packages. There
are households in this country that you may have a cell phone with WhatsApp but
you charge it at your neighbour's house and you are therefore unable to stream the
virtual learning platform. We have to take a human element, Madam Speaker. We
have to take into consideration varying circumstances when discussing how we roll
out this virtual learning platform because we are talking about the future of our
country. [Desk thumping]

Equitable access to education is how we begin to bridge a gap. And I fear,
Madam Speaker, as I see more and more students who are being left out by a lack
of foresight from a tech-less and feckless administration who cannot connect to
virtual learning. The Government has spent more than $28 billion in the last four
years on education. A further 7.9 billion has been allocated to education and
training. A careful assessment of our stagnant education sector would have us
wondering whether or not this country is seeing value for money.

Incomplete schools, schools in dire need of repair, all of these things have a
negative impact on our next generation. Imagine passing by a brand new school,
locked up, abandoned, vines growing on it and you are sent to school in a cramped
hall and you are told to be a model citizen? Madam Speaker, that is unfair to the
citizens, to our next generation. And if we do not stand up here and speak for them,
who will, Madam Speaker? [Desk thumping]

Victor Hugo told us:

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“He who opens a school door, closes a prison.”
Let that sink in, Madam Speaker. Because this is an administration that has left school doors closed across this country, but has come to this Parliament to pass more stringent crime laws than any other administration, and that is how wrong-side they are. Because you are telling us, “Let us leave schools closed, but let us lock more people up”. That is your policy position? It is nothing to be proud of.

Our education sector needed to find opportunity in crisis. We should not be here trying to cut and paste a paper-based curriculum and adapt it to virtual learning. The leadership we need now must be forward-thinking and courageous. Regression is not an option. The future is counting on us. We need to standardize the training apparatus for our teachers in schools; those who would be providing supplemental training based on the topics taught. The Government has a responsibility to ensure that each and every child has access to the same level of education. It starts with access, Madam Speaker.

Let us empower our teachers. In my office, in the month since our swearing in, Madam Speaker, I have had at least three highly-qualified young people come in to tell me they have applied to the teaching service only to be told that the teaching service is still awaiting interviews from 2015 and 2016. How is it, Madam Speaker, that we have classrooms without teachers and people on a waiting list to become a teacher and we cannot fix that? But you want to do broadband across the country? Make up your mind. Do simple things that you can get done and then we can trust that you could do bigger things. But you are promising big things and you cannot do small things. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, I also listened intently. During my time in the other place, I had an opportunity to contribute on a Motion that discussed the plans for special
education. The former Minister took a very defensive approach. It was not an approach that we could have confidence in. But I am hoping that these two new Ministers of Education see it fit to ensure and to discuss plans for special education. The Government must be clear on their plan for learning assessment. Assess each and every student. Give each and every student in our next generation a fighting chance to survive, Madam Speaker.

I listened to the Minister of Public Utilities. The Minister of Public Utilities wanted to tell us about winning elections. They like to talk about winning elections, but will not discuss responsibility for the state of affairs in Trinidad and Tobago because it is a fact that if you won the majority of the elections then you have to be responsible for the state of affairs as it exists today.

Why is it, in 2020, we as a nation find ourselves in the very same position as we did in the 1980s? How is it, after more than 30 years, we find ourselves again dealing with the failure to address an economic fallout of low commodity prices, which is directly as a result of the lack of planning and preparation by this administration?

Madam Speaker, Nelson Mandela told us:

“When the history of our times is written, will we be remembered as the generation that turned our backs in a moment of global crisis or will it be recorded that we did the right thing?”

I told you at the beginning that I stand as the youngest Member of Parliament for Tabaquite. But I stand amongst my peers who include the youngest Members in this Parliament and we speak for a generation of people, Madam Speaker, that will not allow the continuation of the same old, same old type of politics, the same old promises and the same old lack of accountability. This budget is an attempt to

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convince us that we have been graciously handed the support we require to survive, that we as a nation should be so grateful, Madam Speaker.

The Minister of Finance said he came and he spoke with humility, Madam Speaker. But this was a budget based on skewed facts, bad advice and a budget bereft of any innovation. Imagine Mi-Fi was the big digital announcement. I do not know if they know that your phone is a hot spot. It is in your hand.

Madam Speaker, this budget and it predecessors have effectively stolen from the future of our children. It has destroyed the social safety net and will set us back, in terms of national development. It echoes the sentiment of the Prime Minister in a CNC3 interview when the Prime Minister said the rich will get richer, and we see it happening today. The budget is a curtain call on five years of economic collapse and we repeat and we itemize that this economy collapsed before COVID-19. [Desk thumping]

Imagine, Madam Speaker, that the Minister came here to tell us that we were doing well before COVID-19; that this was a nation doing well. So then how can you explain that in an economy that was supposedly doing well within one week of a shutdown, people were lining up waiting for hampers and signing up for salary relief grants? In an economy that is doing well, how is it that we have citizens who could not survive without one month's salary, Madam Speaker? That means it was not a strong economy. [Desk thumping]

The hardships we faced mere weeks into the COVID-19 crisis were as a result of the inertia of a Government who failed to understand that there were many without food, medication and essential services. Madam Speaker, they remained with their head buried in the sand well into the pandemic.

Madam Speaker, they think the pandemic was an attempt—they used the
pandemic as an attempt to ensure that the population forgot what happened before. But before COVID Madam Speaker, unemployment was spiraling upwards. There was no investment, not local, not foreign, none. There was no growth in the economy, no development in infrastructure, no new industries, no improvement in the health care system, no investment in food production and no strategies for enhanced education of our youngsters. So what in this could tell us we were doing, well before COVID? But Madam Speaker, as they came here to tell us that they won the elections, I am here to say the people did not forget. You are on a “bligh”. You have no credit with this population. Take “yuh bligh” and be humble. [Desk thumping]

How disgraceful is it, Madam Speaker, that in a time when we need solutions and innovations and a Government to lead, we get a Government that comes with excuses; a lazy incapacitating scramble of rushed figures and bad facts.

Madam Speaker, when I listened to the Minister talk about painting this pretty picture of what was happening before COVID, reflected on a statement that my friends and I use all the time; basically “faking it for the gram”. Because you are coming here and faking a good, good story, nice story, that we were doing so well. But you know the truth. There was nothing going well in this country before, and the people of this country knew it. I have urged before and I will urge again, that there needs to be an honest assessment of the true state of our economy. If we cannot face and acknowledge the problem we will not get to the solutions.

I have here in my preparation for this debate, and I got it from the Parliament library, which I am very grateful, a copy of the report called *The Imperatives of Adjustment*. This is a draft developmental plan that was commissioned by the then PNM government led by George Chambers in 1983.
Madam Speaker, I was not yet born in 1983, a lot of my colleagues either. But this report outlined the structural problems facing the economy then, and made recommendations to remedy those problems. Some of those recommendations included diversifying the economy and reducing our dependence on oil and gas. It also suggested greater emphasis be placed in boosting agriculture, crafting policies to help our private sector grow and reducing the role of the State as an employer.

Madam Speaker, having read *The Imperatives of Adjustment*, I was struck by two things. Firstly, that these recommendations sounded broadly similar to the UNC's proposals in the economic transformation plan; a plan I am proud to have campaigned on during the last election.

Secondly, the report was commissioned by a PNM Prime Minister and after its publication, it was promptly shelved and ignored. They say those who forget their history are doomed to repeat it. The 1983 *Imperatives of Adjustment* report should serve as a reminder to all of us that the PNM has never cared about fixing the problems in our economy. They have never cared about improving the lives of people. They have always had somebody else to come after and clean up their mess, while passing the blame; a strategy they are very familiar with.

But after 40 years, Madam Speaker, we as a nation stand here facing the same crisis. History seems doomed to repeat itself. But there is a major difference this time. PNM administration is forced now to face the consequences of their own inaction.

5.15 p.m.

My generation, Madam Speaker, will not forget how the laptop programme meant to address inequality in our education sector was unceremoniously scrapped. While I listened to the Minister of Education here today tell us about laptops that
were too expensive, ignoring the fact that you scrapped an entire programme and put nothing in its place, [Desk thumping] nothing in its place, and sought to justify and excuse the indefensible, Madam Speaker. I do not think my generation will forget that at all. Imagine depriving thousands of students access to tools that they desperately need all because of political bad mind. Could never be, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I said earlier this is the first time a PNM Government will have to deal with a mess that they have made, but they may very well be the last PNM Government this Trinidad and Tobago will ever see. My generation will not allow children to suffer from the cycles of abuse of thoughtless, visionless, and feeble PNM administrations that recycle plans and proposals from 1995 and bring it back wholesale, wholesale, Madam Speaker.

Imagine coming here to tell us that they are going to reset the economy. You are resetting the economy with your recycled budget and I think that very soon the Minister will come and say that the achievement that he has had is that he has been able to use recycled paper by using the same budget year, after year, after year. But instead of a reset they are pressing Ctrl, Alt, Delete on the economy. And for the benefit of the Minister of Youth that is a keyboard command for shutting down your computer. Students with laptops know what it is.

But Madam Speaker, what is clear is that they have not been able to execute any of the plans that they have put. Madam Speaker, right now the people of Trinidad and Tobago need one thing and that is jobs, and the only way we can create jobs is by economic growth. Nothing in this budget speaks to helping our private sector grow. Nothing speaks to fostering and unleashing the entrepreneurial spirit among citizens that will help to create jobs. This is a budget without vision,
without inspiration, and absolutely without innovation. In short, Madam Speaker, it is a budget without hope. It is a budget that says to the people stop dreaming about a better future and just make do with whatever there is today. It is telling us “survive, do not thrive”.

Madam Speaker, in a crisis—this crisis currently provides us with the opportunity to dream big. It has forced us online, a space that this PNM administration was trying for us not to go for quite some time. It has forced us to think creatively and to do things differently. Innovation can always occur in crisis but instead of allowing the current crisis to push us into new ways of doing things this Government remains rooted in the past. Outdated ideas, old school plans from old school politicians. That is what we got here on Monday.

Madam Speaker, the people of Trinidad and Tobago deserve more than being told “just survive”. We deserve to be told that we can thrive as a nation and we deserve a Government that allows our citizens to be the best version of ourselves, not begging for basics like water.

Madam Speaker, here are some facts as they tell us not to speak of doom and gloom and not to put the country in a bad light. It is a fact that official estimates from the CSO indicated that real GDP in Trinidad and Tobago declined by a cumulative 9 per cent between 2016 and 2019, the sharpest contraction in more than three decades, with the IMF expecting the economy to contract by a further 4.5 per cent in 2020. CSO estimates indicated that 16,700 persons lost their jobs in the three years to September 2018. September 2018, Madam Speaker, is important because that is before the closure of Petrotrin. Retrenchment notices from the Industrial Court suggest that a further 5,700 persons have lost their jobs between 2016 and 2019. The closure of Petrotrin saw further job losses. It saw more
hardship in fenceline communities like the communities that I represent now, Madam Speaker.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the first quarter of 2020 saw several businesses having to send workers home. This morning we saw news of further business closures, Madam Speaker. So far neither the CSO nor the Ministry of Finance has provided any evidence that they have credible data as to the true impact that COVID-19 and these lock downs are having on our economy. Anecdotal evidence suggest that more than 15 per cent of country’s entire labour force may have been lost due to COVID-19 pandemic, and this has caused immense harm to bread winners and families. And then, we come here on Monday to hear about a hiring freeze from this Government. But they are using COVID-19 as an excuse not as an opportunity, an excuse for their incompetence, an excuse for their failures and as an excuse to drive us into further debt.

While Barbados is implementing exciting new ideas to attract foreign investments and to help local business adapt to this new normal in T&T we are being told “just survive”. That is how little this Government thinks of us. We are not being told that there are opportunities for us to thrive. We are told “just survive”. Increased taxes on the population have not coincided with decreased borrowing or decreased government spending creating an unsustainable situation that puts future generations at peril. Essentially, young people today who are still at school dreaming of a bright future are going to inherit a nation saddled with death, and that will be the legacy of this PNM administration, and it is our duty to speak for that generation and say “be responsible with your investment”. What we have is a responsibility to the next generation that we are not going to saddle them with something worse than we found. Critical times like these demand critical thinking,
and then what do we get? Old ideas, old regime, tax, spend, pass the bill onto the next generation.

Madam Speaker, we have not yet heard from the Minister of Energy in this budget debate, but we have heard from the de facto Minister of Energy because, Madam Speaker, I cannot tell you who the real Minister of Energy is in the five years—six years now of this administration because right after the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, Member for Siparia spoke here, shadow, if you were Minister of Energy, Minister Young, ran up to the podium to discuss the energy record for way more time, Madam Speaker, than his substantive post as the Minister of National Security. So if you had to wonder why national security is the way it is, is because a certain Minister cannot mind his business. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, what is interesting is this flip-flopping on the gas negotiations. So on one hand you can boast that a Prime Minister conducted gas negotiations and it was successful, and then when it is no longer successful you could say, “Well, it was not me. It was not me”. You have to make up your mind. Did you do it or you did not do it? You cannot be half pregnant, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, they continuously speak about the incentives by the PP Administration. Whereas in 2013 you had the CEO of BP Mr. Dudley praising the incentives that the administration had put in place, incentives that we are currently reaping benefits on. Madam Speaker, imagine the Minister came here, the de facto Minister of Energy, came here to tell us that there is no real problem in Point Lisas. It has nothing to do with them and what they have done to the energy sector. But I do not blame Minister Young for not knowing much about the energy sector, after all he did not know a sanctioned aircraft with high level officials from a sanctioned company was in this country. So I guess a lot passes him by, Madam Speaker.
Now, imagine we sit here and we are talking about what is happening at the Point Lisas Industrial Estate. You are telling people who are losing their jobs that better will come in the future. The businesses that were not so effective and efficient they will pack up and they will leave and new ones will come. When? When, Madam Speaker? What are you telling the people who are losing their jobs and on the breadline now? Wait for the better days ahead? Wait for the clear skies that the Minister of Finance promised in 2018? Madam Speaker, it seems that they are woefully unaware of the crisis unfolding at the Point Lisas Industrial Estate. And it is not surprising because Point Lisas is very far from St. Ann’s West so it is easy for it to go by unnoticed.

But let me put an end to the erroneous and inaccurate pie charts and power points used in an attempt to sell a desperate narrative. The fiscal incentives of 2011 did not cost this country any income. It did not. The incentives were always in place but by proper policy, innovation and expertise, and by accelerating the incentives we encouraged phenomenal growth in exploration and production of natural gas. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, this is very important. All taxes were still being paid into the Treasury. No revenue was foregone from the Treasury. Madam Speaker, what the incentives led to was what we desperately needed then and now, new gas supplies. These companies would have never increased their exploration and production had it not been for the incentives.

Madam Speaker, the UNC led PP administration did not make excuses, did not have cover ups, did not attempt to hoodwink the population. We saw the problem for what it was, to arrest the decline in natural gas production by strong leadership. The solution was desperately required for a national development, increased investment and improved sustainability of our hydrocarbon sector; and it
worked. What has the PNM done in a similar fashion with a vision to ensure that we do not go back to a dark place? Absolutely nothing, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, allow me to turn quickly to the renewable energy sector. Minister Imbert announced within his speech the intentions to shift to renewable energy. This would be good news if you could trust them to deliver on any promise. The new reality is that with volatile hydrocarbon pricing and access we must become more self-sufficient in our electricity production. That is a fact. We need more renewable and sustainable energy. Again, in classic form, there was a failure to mention that this project and the questionable manner of procurement will fail to deliver on any new investment, capacity building, or sustainable economic benefits. And the Minister of Public Utilities to follow brought no further elucidation.

Indeed, increasing the T&TEC tariffs may very well be as a result of this project that is now and how it is being implemented. It is another lazier approach to what could have been a great idea. There are different ways in which this could have been done without inflicting more hardships on citizens and potentially higher electricity bills. For example, Madam Speaker, you could have looked at a community solar through cooperative where entire communities could invest in small solar plants, reduce their take from the national grid and may be even score a small profit.

There are numerous examples of good practice internationally on how well this can be done. Implementing the 2015 approved feed-in tariff regime would have enabled any of us to add solar panels to our homes and reduce our T&TEC bills and add to the national electricity when we generate more than we can use. This is the hallmark of sustainability, empowering citizens to reduce their own
bills, reducing CO2 emissions, and freeing up national gas for the downstream sector. This would have been innovative, Madam Speaker, ramping up energy efficiency measures for residential, commercial and the industrial sector to save energy and commit to green energy; an entire untapped industry. They chose none of these options, Madam Speaker. And who is benefiting from what they have selected? None of us.

Madam Speaker, the Minister came in inexplicable defiance while speaking about switching to sustainable and renewable energy to talk about removing the tax concessions on hybrid vehicles and electric vehicles. Low carbon environmentally friendly high efficiency vehicles. These vehicles are also available in small and compact form for family use, citing a traffic problem that they have no idea how to solve.

Now, the hon. Minister of Finance thumped his chest as he spoke about the Paris Agreement and Trinidad and Tobago achieving its commitment to meeting the nationally determined contributions—obligations—then removed all the incentives for low carbon vehicles, this self-imposed hindrance. A large part of our carbon reduction would have been from the transport sector via hybrids, electric vehicles and improved CNG. In one fell swoop in open defiance to the UN Paris Accord of 2015 we have now seriously backpedaled, an international disgrace. No more lower priced green vehicles, no more energy efficient options. They took it away again.

Madam Speaker, I would like to turn to my constituency of Tabaquite and the number one concern to the constituents who have raised issues with me before coming here today is that the property tax is to be implemented in a haphazard and nonsensical method. Why start with residential? Given the current circumstances it
 Appropriation (Financial Year 2021)  
Bill, 2020 (cont’d)
Ms. Haynes (cont’d)

is unnecessary, inhumane, and a burden to already strained citizens and I join my colleagues in the call to hold your hand on the property tax. [Desk thumping]

But specifically for the people of Tabaquite this Government has to be incredibly shameless to ask the good citizens of Tabaquite to pay property taxes when you have abandoned your end of the social contract as an Executive. When was the last time you paved a road in the last five years? You have the audacity to ask us to pay more, and every morning I get calls from Macaulay, Caratal, Parforce, Guaracara, Tabaquite, all these areas with no water. Madam Speaker, I was glad to hear the Minister of Public Utilities talk about the social contract because I have to tell him that he is not keeping up with his end of the bargain. Our taps are dry and you coming to ask us for tax? “Allyuh hadda be wicked”.

We in the constituency office, we have started a campaign #FixOurRoadsTabaquite. It is a social with media campaign that has encouraged citizens to post the state of the roads. Today, Madam Speaker, sitting in this House, I got pictures of a landslip in Caratal. While we sat here on Friday, because of drainage issues, we had flooding in Gasparillo. Madam Speaker, all of these things, all of these burdens, and then you tell them pay more taxes. That is just plain wickedness.

Madam Speaker, economists will tell you that economics is about the management of scarce resources and resources are always scarce. But a national budget is more than simply economics. It represents a vision of a ruling government. It outlines a plan of where we see ourselves in the future. What are we planning for? What are we aiming to achieve as a people? And what are our dreams and aspirations as a nation? This budget is none of that.

Madam Speaker, an economy is not percentages; it is people. An economy is

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not an engine that you can take to a mechanic. The economy is the mechanic and the mechanics and taxi drivers, and retail workers, and market vendors, these are the people they make up our national budget and we need to stop seeing numbers and see people and we would approach this budgeting exercise differently. Ensuring—what our job as parliamentarians and what their job as an Executive needs to be, is to ensure that people of Trinidad and Tobago have an opportunity to get to work. It is not about handout, it is about hand ups.

What this budget is telling the people of Trinidad and Tobago is the Government has no dream or vision to offer this nation. The budget is telling the hard-working people of our nation that we will give you things like less personal income taxes with one hand, but take it back via property tax and the increased cost of living on the other hand. The Government should have used the crisis to innovate, reinvent procedures and policies within our economy. They should have focused on protecting the most vulnerable, putting money back into the pockets of citizens.

I wish to tell this administration, all of 2015 to 2020 they have spoken about reduced Cabinet size. That is not a function of making a Government smaller. What you ought to have done is reduce our interference because you are making things worse when you interfere. If you want to have a smaller Government it is not a smaller Cabinet size. What you have to do is focus on making Government a facilitator as opposed to an implementer. Increased tax allowances are eclipsed by the so-called liberalization of the gas market and the removal of concessions on MV vehicles and the introduction of the property tax.

And, Madam Speaker, in conclusion I will like to paraphrase my colleague in Laventille West with his most popular Facebook post because, Madam Speaker,
I looked for the piper in this budget and “ah” saw the piper within because only a piper would be so—

**Madam Speaker:** Member, Member. I would ask you to withdraw that term. I do not think that term is parliamentary.

**Ms. A. Haynes:** Pardon me?

**Madam Speaker:** I asked you to withdraw the term. I do not consider it parliamentary. With your experience you can find a better word.

**Ms. A. Haynes:** Thank you, Madam Speaker, for your guidance and I withdraw the term. But I know that the population is well aware of the Facebook post and therefore they understand what I am saying about the budget of Trinidad and Tobago. It is a shortsighted, selling off everything we have for a limited short-term gain, and I thank you, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam Speaker:** I want to recognize this as the maiden contribution of the hon. Member for Tabaquite in this House, and I want to congratulate her. And I just want to remind Members as a bit of guidance, when we quote what others say in here we have adopted it as ours. So it might be appropriate somewhere else, but we have to consider whether it is appropriate in here. Okay, thank you. Member for Port of Spain South.

**Mr. Keith Scotland** (*Port of Spain South*): Madam Speaker, hon. Members, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, and yes, Madam Speaker, the jury, because for 20 years I am across the road addressing nine members and 12 members and I thought that was the jury, until Monday 10 August, 2020, when the real jury spoke [*Desk thumping*] and that was the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And on that day the jury delivered a verdict of overwhelming support for the People’s National Movement under the stewardship of the hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. And,
Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Tabaquite claims youth but I want to remind her of an old people saying, that “the voice of the people is the voice of God”. [Desk thumping]

So, the context of this budget, Madam Speaker, because the hon. Minister of Finance was attacked on all fronts, but when this border, when we closed the borders in March 2020, it was an attempt to insulate the country from the full ravages and eviscerating effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. But it was impossible to insulate the economy from the fallout of this pandemic. So when the country views the criticism of the hon. Minister of Finance, I want the country, the jury, Madam Speaker, to view it in the context of the global economy.

Madam Speaker, in the first quarter of 2020 the economy of the United States of America contracted, United Kingdom’s economy contracted by 19.8 per cent in the first quarter. The GDP is expected to fall by 8¼ per cent in 2020. Regionally it is projected that the Jamaican economy will contract by 6.2 per cent. The hon. Member for Tabaquite spoke about Barbados and its innovation. What the hon. Member did not say, Madam Speaker, is that Barbados is under the watchful eye of the IMF and their economy has contracted by .8 per cent even under the IMF. We in Trinidad and Tobago, we are not under the watchful eye [Desk thumping] of the IMF. To my mind that could only be because of the policies implemented by this Government and the Minister of Finance. [Desk thumping]

So, Madam Speaker, when we come to the context of Trinidad and Tobago we cannot ignore, we cannot ignore the COVID-19 pandemic. And what I would want you to put on record, Madam Speaker, is the record of this Government pre-COVID-19. Madam Speaker, it has been said that COVID-19 is being used as
an excuse but what the hon. Member for Tabaquite and the others did not tell the population is that on the 22nd of May, 2020, Moody’s confirmed Trinidad and Tobago’s rating at BA1 and that was one of the highest in the Caribbean and in the world. [Desk thumping] Those are facts and whilst Moody’s is busy downgrading economies, they have kept Trinidad and Tobago on a stable footing at BA1.

So, it is in this context that under the stewardship of the hon. Minister of Finance and the ability to manage the affairs of Trinidad and Tobago that we come to this budget. And this is not a budget by fluke, this is a budget based on hard work. I do not know when he sleeps to produce a budget like this within such a short space of time. And therefore, it is my respectful submission to you, Madam Speaker, and to the wider jury of Trinidad and Tobago that it was achieved through focused strategic delivery, hard work, which led to good governance. [Desk thumping] And why is this so, Madam Speaker? Because if you examine this budget you will see that this budget is part of an overall plan. And it is now pellucidly clear, Madam Speaker, that that is the reason why the jury, the people of Trinidad and Tobago, delivered that overwhelming vote of confidence. [Desk thumping]

Moreover, it is my position that the Minister of Finance has been consistently faithful to the Government’s objective of growing the economy of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, I will not just tell you, I will show you how this is so. I take us back to the budgetary themes of the hon. Minister of Finance from 2016. Madam Speaker, you will know that 2015 there was a faithful day in September—oh happy day! So we will start in 2016. The first theme of this Government under the hon. Minister of Finance in 2016 for the budget was “Restoring Confidence and Building Trust”. That is in a context because Trinidad
and Tobago, the people, the economy was not confident and there was trust that was lost. In 2017 the theme was “Shaping a Brighter Future, a Blueprint for Transformation and Growth”. In 2018 the budgetary theme was “Changing the Paradigm, Putting the Economy on a Sustainable Path”. And in 2019 the theme was “Stability, Strength and Growth”.

5.45 p.m.

Madam Speaker, if you examine the themes, you would see that there is a focus on the development of the economy, building confidence, looking towards a brighter future, changing our paradigm, and stability and strength and growth. What about that seems like a fluke, Madam Speaker? Therefore, when this budget is examined, it is patently obvious that the People’s National Movement over the past year, the past five years, placed the economy on a right trajectory. Having focused on strategic delivery, we were able to stabilize the economy and now, even in the face of an unprecedented global pandemic that is wreaking havoc on economies throughout the world, the Minister of Finance has come with a budget theme, reset and adjust the economy to achieve sustainable growth. Well done, hon. Minister of Finance. [Desk thumping]

It is in this context that we have come to this budget and remember the theme, Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation. In other words, the People’s National Movement, your Government, recognizes that is not just growth but there must be an aspect of innovation. And, Madam Speaker, if one should examine the budget proposal, one can only conclude that the Minister of Finance has a plan, that this Government has a plan and it was witnessed firsthand by the people of Trinidad and Tobago. What is this plan? Madam Speaker, I am not going to talk in a vacuum. If you say there is a plan, the question is well, tell me, where is
the plan? It is my intent for the next five minutes or so to align the budget proposals with the PNM’s plan, which was contained in the manifesto delivered in August 2020, “The Way Forward- The Right Choice”. I commend to my friends on the opposite side, it is mandatory reading, read the manifesto. So, Madam Speaker, I am going to just look at about eight areas to show that in the manifesto, the People’s National Movement promised this and in the budget, it was delivered. And to be specific, because this goes on a record, I will point you to the pages in the manifesto, where the promises were made.

Madam Speaker, I first turn to agriculture, and for those who will do their research, at page 66 of our manifesto, promised:

The allocation of—“$500 million in the Fiscal Years 2021 to 2022 to stimulate and”— incentivize—“all aspects of the agricultural sector…”

Madam Speaker, in the budget delivery of the hon. Minister of Finance, he stated, 500 million stimulus package to support the agricultural sector. That is one.

Housing, I ask you to turn to page 59 of the manifesto document, it was promised in the manifesto:

“accelerated construction and delivery of 25,000 new homes on state lands over a period of 10 years…”

In the budget, it was announced, a 1 billion loan to facility—guaranteed by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to the HDC, 25,000 new homes on state lands in the next 10 years.

Fourthly, energy. In the manifesto, again, page 55:“• Review of the Petroleum Taxes…

• Review”—of— “the application of Supplemental Petroleum Tax…”
In the budget, an increase in the threshold for the imposition of supplemental petroleum tax for small oil producers to US $75 per barrel, up from US $50 per barrel. This is aimed at increasing investment in further production, fuel market to be liberalized.

Five, creative and cultural industries. Madam Speaker, I respectfully ask and I point you to the manifesto, page 38:

“• Provide fiscal incentives for corporate sponsorship…”

In the budget, increased tax allowance for corporate sponsorship of nationals in creative and sporting industries from 6 million to 12 million. Diversification and manufacturing at page 49 of the manifesto states:

“…facilitate the use of Private Equity and make it easier for SMEs to get themselves listed on the…Stock Exchange.”

Equity funding:

“• Commence an aggressive drive in the construction of housing…”
“• Continue and expand guaranteed soft loan programs for Small and Medium Enterprises.”

In the budget, equity funding to medium and small-sized enterprises listed on Trinidad Tobago Stock Exchange; 20 per cent of state housing construction programs to small and medium-sized contractors; wear and tear revision rate for plant and equipment.

Tourism, I did not find the page but I think, Madam, it is at page 73 of the document. If I am wrong, please forgive me, expansion upgrade of the tourism accommodation upgrade project in Tobago. In the budget, expansion upgrade tourism accommodation upgrade project.
Creating a digital society, page 35 of the manifesto. And it was promised there that we will develop and implement policies for affordability and equity of digital access for every segment of the population, with special focus on the vulnerable; remove all taxes on computers, mobile, digital equipment, cell phones, software and accessories. In the budget, 45,000 Mi-Fi wireless Internet devices; 50 million for procurement of laptops; removal of taxes on computers, laptops and mobile phones.

And finally, Madam Speaker—I need to stop I am getting tired—supporting people and the vulnerable, page 44 of the manifesto, an increase in the personal income tax allowance. Go to the budget, increase in personal tax allowance from 74 to $84,000. Madam Speaker, what that means is that this Government has a plan; that is the first thing. But the second significant aspect, it shows that this Government keeps its promise to the [Desk thumping] people of Trinidad and Tobago. It is no surprise then, that on the 10th of August, the jury delivered that verdict. But it may very well be asked, these alignment with budget and the manifesto, how does it translate itself? Where does the rubber hit the ground? It is my view and I will just like to show about four areas where these plans will be beneficial to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And when I say the people, I mean all the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, when a government builds 25,000 houses in 10 years, my math tells me it is an average of 2,500 houses per year. That would mean that in Trinidad and Tobago, every year, on an average, there will be 2,500 new houses that must be beneficial to persons in need of housing. The expansion upgrade of the accommodation upgrade and that directly benefits Tobago, because we know that Tobago relies primarily on tourism and that plan—that policy in the budget
will benefit the people of Tobago, especially the tourism industry in the sister isle of Tobago.

Madam Speaker, persons earning salaries less than $7,000 per month will not pay taxes. It means that persons will have persons who are earning $7,000 and less will have all their moneys in their pockets. All I say to them, an old attorney from Tobago, Patrick Godson-Philip once told me, “If you earn $1, sink 10 cents.” So when this benefit is accrued to you, people of Trinidad and Tobago, my humble advice is do not spend all, sink.

The next one, and this is the one that I think that moves the constituency of Port of Spain South most, is the provision of fiscal incentives for corporate sponsorship of cultural events. It is a very welcomed theme and a very welcomed proposal by the hon. Minister of Finance because, Madam Speaker, it is a fact that Port of Spain South has in the past and will continue to contribute in a significant manner to the cultural and sporting life of Trinidad and Tobago. From Earl Crosby, Len “Boogsie” Sharpe, Pelham Goddard, Ray Holman, we are not boastful. In sport, Russell Latapy, Thema Williams. I am told that Khary Pierre hails from Chenet Alley, Observatory Street. I see the hon. Member for Port of Spain North is telling me that that is in his constituency but when it is local government elections, we share that constituency. So we claim Khary Pierre for the purposes of this debate. But more importantly, and in addition, we have Akeal Hosein, a proud son of John John. That is a positive note coming out of Port of Spain South. And, Madam Speaker, by the way, it may have escaped the hon. Members on the other side, but Trinidad and Tobago can boast of hosting, successfully, post the reopening of cricket after its closure due to COVID-19, the first International T20 Tournament at Tarouba and Queen’s Park. So the CPL that we are watching now...
follows—the IPL that we are watching now follows our successful hosting of the Caribbean Premier League that must not escape the national consciousness. So we say that even those provisions made in the budget affects not just Trinidad and Tobago, but particularly the constituency of Port of Spain South.

I now come to what I call constituency issues. Madam Speaker, I have a wish list for the hon. Minister of Finance and I know he does not sleep because I have shown you he is prolific. In Port of Spain south, we need development, we need resources and if I start from Pump Trace, which is to the furthest east and come down, I see that there are 25,000 houses promised, we would like some of that in our area, in order so the people of Port of Spain South can have new housing and I can tell you our Minister of Finance is diligent. You come further down to East Dry River, Nelson Street, Duncan Street, Plaisance Road, across at Sea Lots, infrastructural development is an area that we need to look at. Then, Madam Speaker, we come to the capital of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain. Port of Spain, as being the capital, must return to being a lively city and not a ghost town as it is now.

6.00 p.m.

And I know that we will have resources to transform our capital city into the gem of the Caribbean that it deserves to be. As we go further west, we look at the engine room in Woodbrook. We look at St. James and there is a battle between the burgeoning businesses and persons who reside there. It is our fervent—it is our fervent hope and is our desire to ensure that both coexist and they must coexist in a meaningful and peaceful manner.

I go further north to Woodbine, Bournes Road, to the top of the hill, Jeffers Lane. Those are areas, the roads, I will speak to the honourable Minister of Works
and Transport and see if resources can be allocated to fix those. In other words, Madam Speaker, Port of Spain South, you have been patient. We have not forgotten you. We intend to address the issues, the pressing issues that are there in Port of Spain South.

Madam Speaker, apart from that, we say that this Government, contrary to all the noise that is being made on the other side, has given this country focused and strategic governance and delivery for the past five years. [Desk thumping] But coming of the mouth of the hon. Member for Tabaquite, she said that the UNC’s, one of their plans, their manifesto, found it in a 1983 George Chambers PNM plan. It means that even the UNC are taking, my friends on the other side, the PNM plans and making it their own. Great is the PNM. [Desk thumping] Great is the PNM [Desk thumping] that even those who knock their desks and oppose us, taking the plans and coming and saying, we using it. Thank you for your honesty.

As we look forward, Madam Speaker, I say that this is the first time in 13 years that my predecessor, the hon. Marlene Mc Donald, is not delivering a budget speech on behalf of Port of Spain South. I want to recognize her for her sterling contribution to this House and to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping] Ingratitude is worst than witchcraft. We must, as we grow older and younger, we must look at these phrases. I want to thank the people of Port of Spain South for reposing the confidence in me to represent them. [Desk thumping] I want to thank the PNM family for giving me this opportunity to serve. [Desk thumping] Last, but certainly not least, Madam Speaker, I looked at this budget and my mother, God rest her soul, would have said, “what is a great budget?”, but she would have found plenty faults in my speech. So, I want to thank her also, Madam Speaker. [Desk thumping] Madam Speaker, I have not taken up all my time, but
Madam Speaker: I will like to recognize the Member for Port of Spain South. This is his maiden contribution and I congratulate him. [Desk thumping] I now call upon the Member for Chaguanas West.

Mr. Dinesh Rambally (Chaguanas West): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I want to thank the House for this opportunity to contribute to this budget debate. Let me begin by paying tribute to my political leader and the Leader of the Opposition, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC. [Desk thumping] Her powerful analysis and response to the budget on last Friday clearly revealed some very important points for this population. The figures that are being bandied about by the hon. Minister of Finance are unreliable. The fiscal measures announced are untrustworthy and the Government’s announcement of its intention to implement certain plans are simply deceptive. [Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker, as Member of Parliament for Chaguanas West, I wish to thank my constituents who have given me their mandate to serve. I have been fortunate to hold pre-budget and post-budget consultations and discussions for them, and on their behalf, they have entreated me, Madam Speaker, to address some of their more pressing concerns. Madam Speaker, before I get into those, I think I should treat with two of the previous speakers, and I would, first of all, wish to treat with some of the matters that have been raised by the hon. Minister of Education. I know my colleague, MP for Tabaquite, has dealt with a lot, the majority of the matters, in a very holistic way and comprehensively but, you see, Madam Speaker, I think in respect of the hon. Minister of Education, I think that there is a misconception, a fundamental premise that they are belabouring, and that is the more they say the same thing, Madam Speaker, they feel that the rest of us
will somehow believe it. But, Madam Speaker, you know, there is the common parlance, you could fool some of the people sometimes, but not all of the people all the time. [Desk thumping]

Now, the hon. Minister wants us to put blame or they want to put the blame, sorry, on us, the fact that there is no water, they want to put that blame on the UNC, when it is a known fact that the PNM has ruled this country for the majority of years more than any other political party. [Desk thumping] Now, I want to say clearly that I agree that the hon. Minister of Education’s contribution today sounded really like the product of a PNM education. I call it “PNM brainwash 101”. You see, the PNM has failed. They are stuck in the days when the futures of our children were in book bags.

Unlike the hon. Leader of the Opposition, political leader, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, they never anticipated or conceptualized that the future of our children were in laptops, hard drives and iClouds. [Desk thumping] PNM education is what I would say, Madam Speaker, an anachronism. It is steeped in antiquity. It will not take this country forward. It will not take us into the future. Imagine they have the audacity to talk about substandard laptops when we are talking about substandard government under the PNM.

I want to tell the hon. Member and Minister of Education that she cannot stand from a PNM—I should say the hon. Member cannot stand from a PNM pulpit to lecture any of my colleagues, particularly from Barataria/San Juan, about helping constituents whether from their own constituency or otherwise. The help that the PNM has executed is for them to help themselves. This is what the PNM does. They help themselves to the Treasury and they help themselves to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, particularly during the COVID pandemic—
Mr. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), please.

Madam Speaker: Member, I would ask you to retract those last statements. Maybe you can find another way to say it. If not, I will tell you to retract it and move on.

Mr. D. Rambally: Madam Speaker, what I would say, Madam Speaker, is that it is one—

Madam Speaker: Retract. You have to withdraw it. You have to retract it. You have to say that.

Mr. D. Rambally: That statement is withdrawn. Madam Speaker, what I would say is that it is one thing to talk about people helping themselves when we are talking about how people can access the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund in an easy manner during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Desk thumping] That is the only help that they know how to go about helping themselves. Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: I am not sure about, again, that is the way about people going about to help themselves, I am not sure again in the context. It is almost to me as if you are repeating what I have asked you to retract. Okay? So, as I say, retract that. If you cannot find a way to say it that will be in accordance with the Standing Orders, then I would suggest that you leave it.

Mr. D. Rambally: I withdraw. I would wish to get on with the rest of the contribution, and I thank you for that guidance. Madam Speaker, the hon. Minister of Education is talking about laptops being substandard. I wonder whether the hon. Minister knows that since 2010, 2015 and beyond that schools were actually outfitted with computer classrooms and that those classrooms did not carry laptops, but they actually carried desktops and substantial amounts of desktops were allowed to rundown, whittle away, between the period 2015 to 2020. And,
therefore, when we talk about laptops being substandard, there was actual equipment in many schools that could have been utilized.

I would like to say, and I say this very humbly, Madam Speaker, that when the honourable Minister of Education was speaking about ECCE and primary schools, and there were large numbers attributed to the amount of schools that were being referred to, I want to say, and I say this very humbly on behalf of my political leader, I want to say, you are welcome [Desk thumping] because there was a time when it was stated and it was being asked, where are all these schools? But now we are hearing that these schools exist. So I want to say, on behalf of my political leader, you are welcome.

Now, one of the things I want to move on to is that we have heard a lot and my colleague has already said we heard nothing about GCE and CAPE and CSEC and what have you, those are important matters. We have not heard—we heard about the SEA results—have those teachers and principals who have been involved in the teaching of SEA students, have they been paid the money, the $20 million that have been promised to them? We have heard nothing about that. So I want to put that on the record please, Madam Speaker.

You know one of the speakers before, please, Madam Speaker, was talking about “Oh, some of my colleagues on this side cannot go walking certain places and they do not want to venture walking where we walk”. But I want to say that we could walk wherever there is a flood, and we do not have to worry about walking in floodwaters. [Desk thumping] Our constituents walk with us whenever there is flooding. We do not have to worry about getting douse down with water. Now, I want to also—

Madam Speaker: Member, just about that last part, again, I want to caution you.
Certain serious consequences came out of that and I do not think that is something that you should make light of. Okay?

**Mr. D. Rambally:** I am guided, Madam Speaker. Does Madam Speaker wish that I withdraw that as well? It is withdrawn.

Now, I want to say, Madam Speaker, that when I am on the way home, please, on a daily basis, I have to pass through St. Joseph. I see the Member of Parliament for St. Joseph is here. I have to drive through Maracas Royal Road. It passes through the Member for Tunapuna. Part of that is in your constituency, and I eventually reach in the Member of Parliament for St. Ann’s East, her constituency. Unlike other people who go on mainstream media and say, “Ah vote fuh you, you know, but yuh turn your back on me”, I can say clearly, I did not vote for the Member for St. Ann’s East in the last election, but I want to say that I am very aware of that constituency, and I could tell you that the roads are really bad. The roads are really bad. So I could take those Members on a tour of their own areas within their own constituency to show them the poor roads that exist there. So let me move on now to the last speaker, Member of Parliament for Port of Spain South.

Now, he is my colleague at the Bar and a good friend, and I am not seeing him now, but I would have wanted to tell him that, you know, he was talking about addressing the jury, but the reality of the matter, please, I want to tell him that it seemed as though he was really dealing with a voir dire, and let me deal with the trial now. Now, one of the matters he was talking about please, Madam Speaker, the fact that we have avoided the IMF, having avoided the IMF says two things. Everybody runs from the IMF. And I am saying yes, it is good that we have not had to go there, but the way he puts it is as though that is salvation for this country.
Do you know why we cannot go to the IMF? The whole posit or the whole underpinning substratum of going to the IMF is that you have to satisfy them first that you can implement quick measures. They like to see quick measures implemented so that the economy can turnaround.

Do you think this Government, having promised things like Wi-Fi in 2015 and still coming in 2020 to say that, could ever qualify under the IMF? So I want to make that very clear. When he speaks about Moody’s and the fact that we have a BA1 we have, in fact, been downgraded. We still hold a good—and again, I want to say on behalf of the political leader of the Opposition, you are welcome, because the moneys that have been there invested as heritage moneys, they were put there during the period 2010 to 2015.

Now, we on this side, we do not like to revel when our fellow countrymen are suffering. So whilst thousands of citizens continue to remain outside the borders, we would not jump. We would hesitate to revel in matters like CPL. Of course, we are glad that we can have some sport and things like that, but we would hesitate. So I am afraid we do not share that enthusiasm. And if we extend it, that is why we have asked the Government to seriously reconsider, Madam Speaker, salaries and exemptions for Ministers and MPs, because it is very difficult to say that we can celebrate when, in fact, we see our fellow countrymen suffering.

Now, the hon. Member for Port of Spain South, I want to say that he seems to be operating under some induced delusion please, Madam Speaker, and misconception. The fact that the belated PNM Manifesto has been copied and pasted into the budget statement does not mean it will be executed. That is not performance, Madam Speaker. That is what you call sophistry. He asked us to look at the manifesto and look at it for research. Well, I want to look at the—I prefer to
look please, Madam Speaker, to the actual documents that have been laid in this debate. And I really did not want to go too much into figures, but in as much as the Member for Port of Spain South has done so, I want to point out a few things please.

Now, Madam Speaker, the population continues to be asked to accept any and every consequence of the Government’s mismanagement of the economy over the past five years as being attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has become this PNM Government’s scapegoat for its incompetence. COVID-19 is the new vision 2020. I want to urge all economists, all analysis—all analysts sorry, and the population at large to bear in mind that the only way we can know how we are getting out of this crisis is that we must first understand how we landed ourselves there in the first place. You see, the honourable Minister of Minister, Member for Diego Martin North/East, presented his budget statement themed Resetting the Economy for Growth and Innovation. At the outset, let me say that on behalf of the 30,000, over 30,000 constituents of Chaguanas West, that we are not convinced that the policies and strategies stated in that budget presentation will produce the desired effect.

I want to remind our country that three years ago, October 2017, in the budget 2017/2018 fiscal package, the theme was essentially the same, Putting the Economy on a Sustainability Path. From the theme alone, and my hon. Leader of the Opposition has said it already, we can conclude that this budget is a stuck eight track cassette player replaying the failed ideas and promises of yesteryears. We are worse off now more than ever before, let alone five years ago. This Government’s theme should be more aptly stated as: blame Kamla, blame the UNC, blame the pandemic, blame oil and gas price, blame everything except us.
But, moving along, Madam Speaker, a budget really, we have to look at revenue and expenditure and how the difference between these are accounted for, whether there is surplus deficit and otherwise. So, Madam Speaker, unlike the previous speaker who looked at the manifesto, having looked at the estimates that we have seen, I want to start with the expected revenue. Madam Speaker, it is very simple. If your revenue projections and assumptions are wrong, then the rest of the ideas and proposals would be pie in the sky and old talk resulting in non-ending hardship for the population for generations to come.

Let us examine for a few minutes, Madam Speaker, this key aspect of revenue forecasted for this budget. The Minister of Finance is being somewhat disingenuous with the figures that he has presented. They do not represent the true and dilapidated state of the economy, and I will show you why, Madam Speaker. I am not alone in this view, mind you. I would refer to the statements of two important business organizations which commented on this budget, AMCHAN TT on 05 October, 2020, and Madam Speaker, I quote:

“While we are optimistic about what we heard in the budget presentation, AMCHAM T&T is concerned about the Minister’s revenue projections given that we only managed to raise $32.5B in fiscal 2020 and we are still being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Admittedly”—this is continuing with the quote—“without access to all of the information that the Minister used to calculate his revenue projection, we are somewhat worried that this target is overly ambitious and may force the government to undertake further borrowing or mid-year cuts that could undermine the attempts at modernisation.”

Madam Speaker, the TT Chamber, Trinidad and Tobago Chamber response of the
05\textsuperscript{th} of October, 2020. In the first paragraph of its statement and I quote:

“...while the minister has projected revenue estimated at $41.361 billion, and expenditure $49.573 billion with a fiscal deficit of $8.209 billion for fiscal year 2021”—we believe that—“more detail is required with regard to the income from non-energy as it appears high.”

And, Madam Speaker, and like the former speaker, the Member of Parliament for Port of Spain South, as an attorney preparing for a tax trial, you really have to dig into the evidence. Let us look at performance of revenue collection from the last budget. In that budget, your estimated revenue—I should say the hon. Minister of Finance estimated revenue of $45.473 billion and only collected $32.492 billion. Madam Speaker, that is a shortfall of 2.981 billion. Now, this is from the official Draft Estimates of Revenue for the financial year 2021, and it is to be found at page iv. What the hon. Minister did was to blame that on oil and gas prices and the COVID-19. And, as I said, we can liken this COVID-19 as the new kid on the block of blame, because of that wrong projection for revenues last year, the following happened, Madam Speaker. Withdrawals from the HSF, increased borrowings debt to GDP ratio reaching over 80 per cent and rising. We had to pay VAT refunds by bonds. Large debt owed to contractors and others; no infrastructural work; shortage of foreign exchange and downgrading by international agencies. Madam Speaker, the list goes on and on, continuing into this year’s budget with a freeze on unemployment in the public service, increased VAT on foodstuff, increase in fuel prices, increase in water and electricity rates and now we are talking property tax.

With just 12 months of incorrect revenue assumptions, those were the consequences resulting in pressure for John Public. And, Madam Speaker, this
pressure is real overnight, and I have heard speakers referred to it already, overnight brought news of closure of MovieTowne in Chaguanas. This will not only affect the Chaguanas area, but the entire country. Loss of jobs, closure of businesses. Madam Speaker, we just have to remember with what happened to the Marabella Pointe-a-Pierre area, when the Government had effectively shut down Petrotrin. The effects, Madam Speaker, just like then, the effects now will spread to the entire citizenry. By all indications, the hon. Minister of Finance is wrong again and the million dollar, or I should say the billion dollar question is, what will be our predicament for the next 12 months?

I will now present some facts, and not all, Madam Speaker, but I would like to drill in in some of the figures. I see my friend, former Speaker had mentioned manifesto, I want to drill into the estimates instead to support the views expressed on this side that the revenue projections are wrong. Madam Speaker, according to the Draft Estimates of Revenue for the budget 2021, the estimate of revenue is 39.150 billion in the budget statement. The Minister projected a further increase of 2.214 billion from the measures introduced. When you exclude 905 million from the sale of assets which is not the true revenue, what measures—this is the question—what measures in the budget justify this increase of 2.214 billion?

Madam Speaker, I know of one measure that should reduce the figure, namely, personal allowance increase which will cost 750 million. So where is this increase expected from the approximately 3 billion when you remove the impact of the personal allowance? The question, and this is a burning question for the population, is it property tax? If 3 billion additional is coming from increased taxes, gas prices, then you are reducing the disposable income to generate growth in the economy. [Desk thumping] Does this, Madam Speaker, make any economic
sense?

I heard the last speaker talk about for every last dollar you are sinking and you are dipping and somehow you are bury 10 cents. But if you do not have the disposable income, I do not know where that 10 cents is going to come from. Despite the glossing of tax revenue figures, the population, Madam Speaker, has already caught on even if by instinct the true meaning of the revenue authority. Madam Speaker, the proposed revenue authority is not in charge of imposing taxes. That is the job of the Minister of Finance. The authority is the administrative handle of the Finance Minister targeting the small man like the nuts man and the doubles man after supposedly failing to get enough revenue from the oil, banking and insurance industries and the stock exchange.

Madam Speaker, clearly, the honourable Minister of Finance assumes that these big companies have not been compliant. Madam Speaker, the revenue authority, in and of itself, and under the control of the Minister, will not and cannot do magic with revenue. I go further. Let us look at some of the details for this current budget and, again, I refer to page iv of the estimates. The revised expectation under the heading “Revised Estimates 2020” show revenue 32.492 billion for the last year. This year you are projecting 39.150 billion almost 7 billion more in addition to the 3 billion that I just referred to. Where is all this revenue coming from with the current state of the economy? This is almost a 40 per cent increase. Madam Speaker, these are the kind of details that we need to know when we have to contribute to the budget.

You have, Madam Speaker, increase in income tax that is at page 1 of the estimates, last year was 6.030 billion, this year 6.214 billion. There is an increase of 186 million, notwithstanding we are talking about rising unemployment plus
your self-inflicted freeze in filling vacancies in the public service.

Madam Speaker, let us look further. VAT at page iv your last year Revised Estimate is 6.70 billion, and this increased to 7.400 billion. The 6.700 billion last year, is that amount, because no reduction is made for VAT refunds paid by bonds of $3 billion.

6.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, if those bonds were paid, your last year collection would be lower. The Minister said that the bonds were to clear up a backlog of refunds. Would you then continue to indirectly borrow by issuing more bonds after what I have just said? Madam Speaker, we look at oil companies at page 1 of the estimates, last year’s Revised Estimate was 1.720 billion, this year it is 2.768 billion. So we need to know what to expect or what will happen this year so as to be able to collect an additional $1 billion. Madam Speaker, when we look at other companies, all of this is to be found in the Draft Estimates at page 1, last year again, 5.370 billion; this year 5.852 billion, you are talking about an increase 482 million. Now, we have to weigh that, Madam Speaker, with no forex, reduction in imports, a slowdown of business, COVID-19, a close down of petrochemical plants, why do you expect significant increase?

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER in the Chair]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, next in line, Import Duties; last year was 2.279 billion, this year it is 2.392 billion. I know, I see some of the Members on the other side looking, the House will resolve itself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in due course and we could, you know, delve in on some of these figures. But the point is at this point in time you have no foreign exchange for imports, and in addition to this you decrease the quota on vehicle importation resulting in lower import duties. So we
have to take that with, not a pinch but with a big dose of salt. Is there a hidden agenda to come during the year and increase taxation to meet your target? If that is so this is the fine art of deception, Government style.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, you know this is really prompted by the fact that somebody said, “Let us look at the manifesto”, I want to look at the Draft Estimates that the Minister of Finance has put here. [Desk thumping] When we look at non-tax revenue—I do not want to look at no PNM Manifesto, “promises never materialize”, the Item, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce specifically mentioned in its comments on the budget, page 5 of the Estimates, last year 7.013 billion, this year 11.056 billion. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you are talking about a whopping increase of approximately $4 billion. I think after all that we have said so far an explanation is needed from the hon. Finance Minister providing sufficient and more details. [Desk thumping]

When we consider royalty on oil and gas at page 18, last year 2.812 billion, this year 4.503 billion, so we have an increase of 1.691 billion, notwithstanding the status quo basically remaining the same. So we would need some more explanatory notes. Now, I want to say that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move on because I know time is against me, but I hope I have somehow been able to reveal some of the details that we have concerns over and therefore it mandates some kind of response in terms of more details on the budget from the hon. Minister of Finance. Now, when you talk about how it is we are going to better business, we have to talk about the ease of doing business, and I want to really go into some of the details that I think would help the ease of business but particularly as it falls under the portfolio of the Attorney General, the hon. Attorney General.

So what we have—this morning I heard the hon. Attorney General talking
about, you know, that we have not been blacklisted thanks to the hard work of the Government in the last five years, but the reality of the matter is that we are in fact blacklisted by the European Union, and if it is the hon. Attorney General wants to take me to task with that, let me quote exactly what they have said, and this is to be found at the Official Journal of the European Union, 7th of October, 2020, and this is what it says:

“Trinidad and Tobago does not apply any automatic exchange of financial information, has a ‘Non-Compliant’ rating by the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information…on Request, has not signed and ratified the OECD Multilateral Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance as amended…”

And it goes on, I quote:

“…has harmful preferential tax regimes, and has not resolved these issues yet.”

This is not the UNC saying that, this is the European Union saying that. So we are still blacklisted and what it means, and I want to say, like the Member for Port of Spain South who is a good friend of mine—the Attorney General is a good friend of mine as well, I want to tell him, it means that Trinidad and Tobago has outstanding legislative homework long overdue. [Desk thumping]

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this morning we heard about—my friends have spoken about the ease of doing business, and we all know it is an accepted fact that 2014 to 2015 we are at 65, and now 2020 we are 105. You know, some of the things that the hon. Attorney General spoke about this morning, when we talk about title searches the fact of the matter is the said systems that he referred to, PIMS—I use the acronym in the interest of time, those problems did not arise
COVID-19. Since January of 2020 we have been having problems with title searches, the PIM system, we did not have sufficient computers in the Registrar General’s building. Some of the computers, whilst they are outfitted and they work for what we call common law searches, they are not in fact equipped to deal with RPO searches, and vice versa. Those that deal with RPO are not really dealing with common law.

The searches that are coming forward the lawyers have made it quite clear, not me, the lawyers; the legal profession, the Title Abstractors Association of Trinidad and Tobago, they have all been complaining. The people are complaining, they are not working. The PIMS is not working. We have heard this morning about the PBRS system coming on board, it is not implemented. I in fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, thought that PBRS had been implemented a couple days ago, but based on what I heard from the Attorney General this morning, hon. AG, it has not been implemented yet. So it means that we are talking about ease of doing business, but simple things like when you want to purchase property and you want to conduct title searches, you cannot get it in a timely manner, and if you do get it, it is not accurate. This is a problem.

If you want to go down to the Registrar General’s building to transaction any business, this I will accept has now arisen, since COVID-19 you have to make an appointment. You have to, in effect, get a slot. The turnaround time in getting a slot is something that is really, we have to work on that. I am told it is a minimum of two weeks. But you know what is one of the troubling issues, that when it was implemented, somehow, miraculously, certain persons were able to purchase or to block—or, I should not say purchase, block all of the slots and there was supposed to be an investigation into that. How could you have a monopoly on the slots for
people to go down to the Registrar General’s building to transact their business? So all of these things are problems. We just have to look at it in reality, you know, the system of land law in this country is that if you want to purchase land, because of land fraud you no longer pay a deposit and then after the deposit you get your title search done. What you do is you proffer to get a full title search and then you will decide, “Okay, I will pay a deposit on that piece of land.” So if these things are not working, you could very well imagine.

You are talking about giving first-time homeowners an incentive, an exemption of up to $2 million, but notwithstanding that you are not being able to have your title sorted out. These things are all going to the ease of doing business. So if someone has to conduct business where they can no longer trust the system, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that they depend on, then the ease of doing business, all that we are talking about is a sham. Now, I heard about, you know, registration of documents, and what have you, when we talk about the other side of the coin and you have the credit institutions now wanting to protect their securities, you cannot have—I mean, the law mandates that you have to register your mortgage bill of sale within seven days, and what have you; yes, the time has been extended but you could imagine an environment where people think that their security is not properly protected because you cannot register it in a timely manner. You are talking about months. They are not going to push forward to lend moneys, and we wonder why we have excess liquidity in the system.

Now, the other thing is that I heard the hon. Attorney General talk about a lot of things, and my learned friend, my colleague for Barataria/San Juan has already spoken about the criminal justice system comprehensively. You know, at the very bottom of the ladder, and I use the word “bottom of the ladder” very
loosely, I mean no disrespect, but you want to talk about big things, but simple things like Commissioner of Affidavits, the administration of justice depends on the work of these persons. They are the ones who are required to commission affidavits to do statutory declarations and that is when documents are actually accepted in the courts and otherwise. And do you know how much they earn for commissioning an affidavit? Since the Act was passed, Act No. 5 of 1977, they are paid $2.50 for a principal affidavit, and if there are any exhibits attached to it, 50 cents thereafter. So you could imagine that you are commissioning affidavits but you being paid probably $3.00 to commission an affidavit in this day and age in 2020, and these are rates that were prescribed since 1977.

So when we talk about, you know, helping persons and we are talking about disposable income, we really have to get real. So that I would hope that the Attorney General looks into these things. You can have however many commissioners in the country but we need to remunerate them, they are essential to keeping the administration of justice running. Talking about CAT Reporters and transcriptions, that was on the criminal side, on the civil side in the Industrial Court you do not get the transcriptions in a timely manner and that is because there is a shortage, even in the High Court. So I want to point out that, it is not as the Attorney General saying, “We have cleared up backlog”, and whatever, maybe in the criminal justice system but not otherwise.

Now, he spoke about the Industrial Court, since 2015 to 2020 the amount of disputes reaching the Industrial Court, it has increased as a result of the economy mishandled by this Government. And therefore the question is, why is it that year after year the hon. President of the Industrial Court has to ask for that building that they are housed in to be totally dedicated to the court? Why can we not ensure that
they have the facilities that they need and therefore they can have more courtrooms? To me these are no-brainer, you know, issues, we should be able to help and to ensure that these things are done.

Pandemic leave, well that is a next story by itself, and do you know that when COVID pandemic started, March 12th to what have you, that weekend it was so bustled with activity with this Government, and pandemic leave. And then in May 26th, thereabouts, then you hear the Prime Minister say, “Well, we doh need that anymore”, why do we not need it anymore when the spike actually occurred thereafter? I would think that we need it now more than ever. And here it is you have the previous Minister of Labour saying—well, not to quote her words, but it was reported, Andy Johnson, you know, a noted Express newspaper reporter, In defence of Jenny. So I say all of these things because we are talking about promises never materialize.

Fair Trading Commission, whether this Government accepts it or not there are serious concerns, Mr. Deputy Speaker, about the proposed freedom to petroleum dealers to fix they own price margins. This, we have said before and it is being stated in the public, it could lead to anti-competitive conduct, harmful to healthy commercial competition, and/or I would say, conducive to price gorging. And therefore the question is, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we would like to know from the hon. Attorney General and/or the Minister of Trade and Industry whether the Fair Trading Commission is fully staffed and functioning. [Desk thumping] To date, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how many investigations has the Commission initiated and have any applications actually ever reached the High Court? And so we need to know all of these things. Is the Commission in a position to deal with complaints of anti-competitive conduct detrimental to consumers? Having a fully
functional Fair Trading Commission would add a sense of fairness, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It would add a sense of fairness, equity and transparency to the economy thereby bolstering investor confidence and consumer satisfaction. So I urge the Government to take note of that.

As my time winds up, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wanted to talk about, you know, property tax. What I will say is the blanket statement, the constituents of Chaguanas West do not support any measures, any fiscal measures to implement property tax, whether now or at any given time. [Desk thumping] I wanted to say that, you know, I have heard about flooding and perennial flooding, it is very difficult for people to live comfortably that whenever you have rains falling heavily that they are at risk of flooding. I did not come here, today being the first time, to criticize the Government.

Immediately after the elections, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wrote to the Ministry of Works and Transport, the Minister, and I indicated some of the areas that we are having problems in Chaguanas West and therefore we need the assistance of the central government to be able to roll out some infrastructural projects so that we can mitigate flooding. Even myself whenever rain falls, you know, late at nights I cannot sleep because this is the reality in which we live, constituents will start calling because they are being flooded out.

We used to call it flash flooding but it is no longer flash flooding. It starts off resembling flash flooding but it does not dissipate as quickly as before, and that is because we now have to revisit our infrastructural issues, our drainage issues. And so I want to urge the Government, it is far better to look into these problems and try to mitigate them than every year you have people going through this kind of suffering only then to have the Government having as a recurring expenditure,
some kind of grant that you now have to give out by way of relief. Would you prefer to give out relief every year of 30 million, 40 million, 50 million or would you prefer to try and start mitigating flooding issues and everybody will be comfortable? So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is something that I hope that it will not fall on deaf ears.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in terms of the property tax—Mr. Deputy Speaker, how much time do I have again?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Just about four minutes.

Mr. D. Rambally: I am very grateful. I just want to say in terms of property tax that we must remember that people’s ownership of lands, how they came to own lands, they were not purchasing houses; they were not purchasing lands to build houses. You have different communities, whether you call it indentureship, whether you call it slavery, whatever you call it, people came here and they were forced to work these lands, and subsequent to that they started to own the lands. They worked these lands to make a living and a home for themselves. In their time of greatest need, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they should not be penalized for having gone through, through generations, what they did to now come at their lowest to have to be kicked whilst they are down to have to pay property tax on their hard-earned efforts on their properties.

So I want to say that that is something that we must bear in mind when we talk about property tax. Land and building taxes is something different from property tax, and we all know what is the difference. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank this House and I would like to thank my colleagues. I totally adopt and endorse all of the speakers who have come before me. I know that they have made powerful contributions. I just hope in the interest of the nation that all
that we have said on this side does not fall on deaf ears. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [Desk thumping]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Thank you. I would like to recognize the hon. Member for La Brea. [Desk thumping]

**The Minister of Labour (Hon. Stephen Mc Clashie):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am honoured to make my first contribution to an Appropriation Bill as the Member for Parliament for the constituency of La Brea, and more so as the Minister of Labour. I am deeply humbled to be accepted to serve my constituents and the people of Trinidad and Tobago as I strongly believe that life is about service. In this regard I am grateful to my constituents of La Brea who have placed their confidence in me to represent their needs, views and interest. I also wish to thank the Prime Minister for bestowing confidence in me to spearhead a very critical Ministry, the work of which underpins the achievement of many of the mandates articulated by the Government and will undoubtedly be in the spotlight in this budget and over the next 10 years as we work towards Vision 2030.

People generally look at the Ministry of Labour to develop policies and programmes that facilitates sustainable job creation, protect the rights of workers and maintain industrial peace. The work of such a Ministry assumes even greater significance in the current times as conversations revolve around ways of protecting lives and livelihood and keeping people in employment and business as far as possible. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am committed to doing the work, collaborating with the social partners and other stakeholders and creating synergies between education, industry and labour in order to generate decent jobs, promote equal opportunities for all and maintain industrial peace and harmony. I wish to place on record, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my appreciation to the Finance Minister and
his team for the balancing act that they would have performed in preparing the budget presentation for yet another year.

We are all aware of the monumental effort that it takes to allocate extremely scarce resources and to what are never-ending needs and wants. Somehow our Minister of Finance has managed to deliver well-formulated measures which seek to align Trinidad and Tobago in the best position for recovery, growth and innovation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have heard many pronouncements on the revenue and the expenditure and by and large the report and feedback from the national community has been generally very positive. We know that there will be differences in how we see the actual implementation and/or the path that we take to achieving our objectives. I dare say, if I were to say I wanted to go to the Hilton Hotel now and I was using the savannah that somebody will say, “Why don’t you use another route. Why don’t you go over the hills”, and so in this budget presentation we are all heading generally in the same direction but we may not necessarily be taking the same route, and therefore that is expected.

The budget will be read, it will be argued, direction criticized, but at the end of the day there will be a budget, and as a Government we will have to implement and the Opposition will monitor and provide feedback as we go forward. So I want to discuss this afternoon, tonight rather, the issue of the budget from a labour market context. The last budget focused on stability, strength and growth, we were finally poised to launch the economy forward in fiscal 2020, however, we have since faced a dual crisis of the bottoming out of energy prices and the disruption of supply chains and reduction in demand caused by COVID-19. Mr. Deputy Speaker, not surprisingly the global labour market is also in crisis, we are not alone. The International Labour Organization, ILO, reported in the World
Economic and Social Outlook report published in January 2020, that the global employment rate stood at 5.4 per cent in 2019 and was projected to remain essentially the same over the next two years.

In another report, this time published in June 2020, just six months after, the ILO forecasted that the outlook for global labour market recovery in the second half of 2020 will be uncertain and incomplete and will not be enough for employment to return to pre-pandemic levels this year. In the Sixth Edition of the ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work, published by the ILO on September 23, 2020, it was estimated that 94 per cent of workers reside in countries with workplace closures of some sort. Estimate of working hours lost in the second quarter of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic stood at 17.3 per cent or the equivalent of 495 million full-time jobs. This represented an upward revision from the estimate of 400 million full-time jobs lost which was reported on June 30, 2020. Looking closer at home, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is estimated that at least 34 million jobs have been lost, some temporarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America and the Caribbean for the first half of 2020. And according to a new report from the International Labour Organization, in addition, Latin America and the Caribbean has been deemed to be the most affected region in the world in terms of hours work and labour income as a consequence of COVID-19.

The Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC, estimated that there would be an expected 5.3 per cent drop in gross domestic product in the region. The report further states that the region will experience a sharp increase in unemployment with resultant negative effects on poverty and inequality. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago we have been
experiencing the devastating effects of the pandemic on our labour market. From January 2020 to October 01, 2020, based on retrenchment notices submitted to the Ministry of Labour, 2,262 persons were identified to be retrenched. This exceeds the annual figure compared to the past five years. In August alone notices involving 1,207 workers to be retrenched were received by the Ministry of Labour. The greatest numbers come from the financing, insurance, real estate and business services sector, 825; wholesale and retail, trade, restaurants and hotel sector, 470.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we examine the quarterly Central Statistical Office data, we can see that in Trinidad and Tobago the employment rate increased from 3.4 per cent in the third quarter of 2015 to 4 per cent in the third quarter of 2016. It was followed by another increase of 5.1 per cent in the third quarter of 2017, but in 2018 we witnessed a fall in the unemployment rate to 4.6 per cent.

Let me hasten to add, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the notices received by the Ministry of Finance are the official notices that came from what I would call, established organizations. I think it would be dishonest and disingenuous to stand here and say that given what we know in our everyday lives that the figure is much higher given that many of these retrenchment notices are not reported to the Ministry of Labour. I note that groceries and mall shops, and so on, who may not in fact send those notices to the Ministry of Labour, we all know have been laying off people and therefore the rate of unemployment may be significantly higher than reported directly to the Ministry.

So I do not want us to walk away and be in la-la land thinking that the reported figures tell the whole story and the whole truth. We need to add some realism to where we are at.

7.00 p.m.
It is important to note, however, that prior to the pandemic the employment rate in Trinidad and Tobago was very low, especially when compared to the ILO’s estimate of the regional employment rate of 8 per cent for 2018 and 8.1 per cent in 2019. ECLAC has forecasted that employment in our region would increase to 11.5 per cent by the end of 2020.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the figures tell a story that we are in difficult times, however, all is not lost. Based on proactive measures taken by a caring government, including broadening the social safety net to protect those most affected, we have been able to reduce some of the negative impact of the pandemic on our workers and employers.

In response, true to the Government’s commitment to putting people first, nurturing our greatest asset as enshrined in the first schematic area of Vision 2030, we sought to avoid a humanitarian crisis by increasing and introducing social programmes for those persons who would have been most affected, especially the vulnerable groups.

These social initiatives were, and continue to be, crucial in mitigating many of the ill effects that this pandemic gave rise to, especially amongst our most vulnerable citizens. While the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Social Development and Family Services have elaborated on the social support programmes, I would like to mention the diligent work done by the Ministry of Labour under the former Minister, Mrs. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus and the Permanent Secretary and her team in these unprecedented circumstances to protect the safety and health of workers.

In a short space of time through the Occupational Safety and Health Agency and Authority, the Ministry developed a number of workplace policies and
guidance documents. In addition, a wider technical team from the Ministry of Labour was instrumental in the development of the National Policy Guidelines on Preparing Workplaces in Trinidad and Tobago for COVID-19, and which was approved by Cabinet on August 06, 2020.

We must be very grateful as a people that we are under astute leadership where putting people first so that no one is left behind is our first priority. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is a government that cares about the people. We do not have to look any further that when the Minister of Finance announced that the personal income tax exemption level would be increased from $72,000 to $84,000 annually with effect from January 2021. This means that persons earning $7,000 or less would not be required to pay income tax. This strategic move is twofold. These persons who represent the lower and middle-income wage earners will now have more income to provide food, shelter and clothing for themselves, their families during these challenging times.

The second benefit is that with this additional disposable income persons would demand more goods, causing a need for producers and retailers to ramp up their operations. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are talking about a stimulus package on this item alone of $750 million, which is quite significant and which will have a positive impact on the economy in 2021.

During this pandemic, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have had the opportunity to experience the future of work in the present. COVID-19 highlighted the precarious nature of some types of employment, especially the gig economy which has long been seen as a major part of the future of work. We were made aware that these workers do not have the advantage of a safety net in times of unplanned crisis, and the poorest of the society are disproportionately affected and remain the most
vulnerable to the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite these challenges, it is important to identify and capitalize on the opportunities that have presented themselves. We were forced to become innovators as we sought to continue our activities, leveraging technology to conceptualize new ways of working and new ways of delivering services to people, while ensuring business continuity.

With lockdowns across the world, social distancing and other protocols being introduced in our everyday lives, technology is now playing a central role in continuity and development. In Geneva, Brussels, London, New York, Kingston and Georgetown and all other major cities across the world, including right here in Trinidad and Tobago, many persons are now working from home using the Internet and conducting local and international meetings through some form of tele and video conferencing.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, technological advances and the move to more online digital modes of operation would free up—create new jobs, it will create new jobs but it will also mean that those who lose jobs in the transition may need to be trained/retrained to seize the new opportunities around them. That is why opportunities such as the collaboration between the Commonwealth of Learning and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago via YTEPP should be fully embraced.

This is a programme where persons who have been retrenched, are unemployed or under employed can access free online courses in a number of disciplines via Coursera. This programme in particular aims to build skills to allow citizens to re-enter the labour market. It is my hope that more organizations would collaborate and offer such online courses, if not for free, at a discounted rate. We must build on these innovations and opportunities as we lead the country forward.
Mr. Deputy Speaker, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge my predecessor, Mrs. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus, as I speak—[Desk thumping]—to the achievements of the Ministry over the past five years. It is her legacy that I am honouring.

One of these items of priority that was looked at was labour legislation reform. At the heart of this exercise is the development of a clear framework of workplace rights and responsibilities. Modernization of our labour legislation, some of which are as old as 100 years, will contribute to the stable economy through the creation and maintenance of industrial peace, protection of workers’ rights and the improvement of the standard of living of citizens, and the maintenance of a safe and productive work environment for all. This has been a huge undertaking by the Ministry’s legal team, and while it is a daunting task they have remained resolute.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, since January 2016, over 37 stakeholder consultations, including focus groups and working groups, were hosted to review labour legislation ranging from the Industrial Relations Act, to Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act, Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Foreign Labour Contracts Act, contract labour and the National Workplace Policy on Sexual Harassment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, while I acknowledge the road is long, I assure that we will get there. I am certain my colleagues on the opposite side of this honourable House can appreciate that legislative reform takes time, especially legislation that can affect such a wide cross-section of citizens. Nevertheless, to date, six policy position papers have been developed and approved by Cabinet, and the follow through on these key pieces of legislation is one of my main priorities in the
One piece of legislation which we did manage to amend was the Minimum Wages Order. In order to ensure that the most vulnerable in society can earn an acceptable income, allowing them to support themselves and provide a decent standard of living for their families, the national minimum wage was increased from $15 per hour to $17.50 per hour with effect from December 01, 2019. In addition to increasing the national minimum wage, the wages of employees under the Community-based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme, CEPEP, and the Unemployment Relief Programme, were raised by 15 per cent on the same date.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Labour will soon commence a project under the guidance of the Minimum Wages Board to develop a minimum wage determination model for Trinidad and Tobago, as we are committed to ensuring our policy decisions are evidence-based, data driven and reflect the current environment. The terms of reference of this initiative has been completed and tendering for the consultant is to begin shortly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the National Workplace Policy on Sexual Harassment was laid in Parliament on March 08, 2019. The overall purpose of this policy is to provide a framework to treat with sexual harassment in the workplace. In fiscal 2020, the Ministry worked tirelessly to implement this policy through the redesignated Conciliation Advisory and Advocacy Division of the Ministry. This implementation included an awareness programme to educate the citizenry on the policy, which is in full swing as I speak, as well as the drafting of legislation to address sexual harassment in the workplace in Trinidad and Tobago which is currently receiving the attention of the drafting committee appointed by the
Another policy by the Ministry is continuing to implement the National Workplace Policy on HIV and AIDS. In August 2017, we saw the launch of a revised policy. This policy is designed to be used by all organizations in both the formal and informal sectors. The main objective of the policy is the provision of a framework for an effective workplace response to HIV and AIDS in Trinidad and Tobago aimed at reducing employment-related stigma and discrimination against persons living or affected by HIV and AIDS.

In addition to the continued awareness, education and communication on HIV and AIDS as a workplace issue, in the coming fiscal year the Ministry will be conducting a survey to gather baseline data on the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and practices relating to HIV in the workplace. This again is part of our commitment to ensure that our policy decisions are guided by information and evidence.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the issue of labour migration has gained special international, regional and national attention over the past year. I am pleased to inform that an inter-ministerial committee chaired by the Ministry of Labour has made much progress on drafting the labour migration policy for Trinidad and Tobago. [Interruption] This item is of particular interest to me as I represent the constituency of La Brea, the gateway—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, one second. Members, you all are hearing well? Just one second. Members, there seems to be a slight malfunction and the technical guys are looking into it at this moment. Just bear one second. Member, proceed.

Hon. S. Mc Clashie: As I was saying, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the issue of labour migration, coming from the constituency of La Brea which is one of the known gateways for persons coming from South America, this is of particular interest to
me. We want to be certain that migrants are not illegally entering the country and being exploited, or on the other hand denying citizens of scarce resources and employment. These concerns form part of the focus of the labour migration policy which will address these issues and ensure that labour migration becomes a managed process, where both migrants and locals benefit mutually as well as the Trinidad and Tobago economy.

In an effort to promote decent work to migrant workers and harness the benefits of labour migration to Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry of Labour is committed to the submission of a Green Paper to the Cabinet by December 2020.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, distinct from the labour migration policy but interconnected, as many migrants are children, is the national policy on the prevention and elimination of child labour. It is important to understand that the future of Trinidad and Tobago is dependent on the children of today. Every child that is prevented from receiving an education and enjoying a childhood as a result of forced labour is one who may have been prevented from reaching his or her full potential. It is important for us to understand the linkages so that we can see the importance of what we are doing.

The numerous dimensions of child labour extend beyond the Ministry of Labour which is why in fiscal 2019 the National Steering Committee for the Prevention and Elimination of Child Labour was reestablished. This committee continues to meet on an ongoing basis and has developed an action plan, a draft situation analysis, and will soon be engaging a consultant to conduct primary research for the development of a national policy. It is my expectation that this policy will be developed, approved and launched by the end of fiscal 2021, with an integrated implementation plan inclusive of legislative amendments to be rolled
Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the last six months the Ministry of Labour has been no stranger to the development of policies. The COVID-19 pandemic has required the development of numerous workplace policies and guidelines especially with respect to safety and health of employees and persons in general. No other time than now has it been clearer that having a safe and healthy workplace is paramount. A healthy workforce is a productive workforce, and when a worker’s health is compromised the entire organization suffers.

The OSH Authority and Agency has been invaluable in protecting the safety and health of workers and employers during this crisis. The OSH Agency initially published guidelines on COVID-19 for employers and workplaces in March 2020. Many of those guidelines have been revised and updated in line with the current recommendations with respect to COVID-19. In May 2020, the agency republished a return to work guideline. Not only did the OSH Agency assist workers still at the workplace, but during the stay at home restrictions. The OSH Agency also continued to function throughout the pandemic and has even continued to conduct inspections on a case-by-case basis and within the Ministry of Health guidelines and according to their internal COVID-19 business continuity crisis communication plan. In fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, throughout the pandemic, officials from the OSH agency could be seen on multiple webinars, interviews and virtual fora speaking to safety and health in the workplace.

Notably, in July 2020, the Ministry of Labour collaborated with the Supermarket Association of Trinidad and Tobago, the National Insurance Board, and the OSH Agency to host its flagship webinar series, “We Empower, You Thrive”. These interactive sessions were designed to equip owners and employees
of supermarkets, retail stores and pharmacies with empowering information to enhance their business operations and productivity during the pandemic.

Outside of the pandemic and over the past five years, the OSH Agency has been actively pursuing a number of initiatives to promote and ensure compliance with the OSH Act, including the initiation of legal prosecution for the non-reporting of accidents. The OSH Agency also completed its strategic plan 2019 to 2023 as well as its new website which is fully operational, user friendly, interactive and a reliable source for workplace and safety and health issues.

I turn my attention now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the current and future plans of the Ministry of Labour and how can we and do we promote industrial peace. We have changed the name to the Ministry of Labour. This reflects a reorientation of the priorities of the Ministry to a clear focus on labour. When I say that I mean a focus on decent work, job creation, the industrial relations climate, labour legislation and labour market information to inform policy decisions. In short, my focus as the Minister of Labour is to improve the functioning of the labour administration system in Trinidad and Tobago.

I am certain we can all agree that a stable and peaceful industrial relations system is the foundation for economic progress and sustainable growth. Since 2015, this Government has identified as one of its mandates the promotion of proper industrial relation practices and effective democratic trade unionism. The Ministry of Labour continues to serve as the promoter of a stable and sound industrial relations system through it various functions, especially its conciliatory role.

With its redesignation, the Conciliation, Advisory and Advocacy Division has expanded its mandate and is undertaking a restructuring to streamline all new
and core functions, including conciliation, mediation, facilitation and advocacy, violence and harassment in the workplace, sexual harassment issues, domestic violence in the workplace, migrant workers and domestic workers trade disputes and the introduction of a new 24/7 hotline to report such matters.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is important to note that over the period 2015 to 2020, there has been no reported industrial action in Trinidad and Tobago. Whether it be correlation or causation, over this same period the division has embarked on extensive outreach. Even during this pandemic virtual outreach and webinars have taken place along with radio and television interviews. This has been part of the Ministry’s continued commitment to promoting rights and responsibilities in the workplace through education and awareness.

Of course the Ministry’s focus will always be on employment. Over the last five years the Ministry has worked in this respect, but in the coming term I intend to redouble the efforts of laying the foundation for sustainable job creation, not just for increasing the quantity of jobs, but also the quality of jobs.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was excited that the Minister of Finance mentioned that the Government would be prioritizing public sector construction projects as well as utilizing public/private partnerships and encouraging private construction projects. Construction projects have the potential to generate a significant number of jobs over the length of the project and due to the multiplier effect after the completion of the project. These initiatives will also function to build the skills of the workers and make them more employable for future projects.

7.30 p.m.

In addition to the construction sector, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the agricultural sector on which we have turned the spotlight through extensive attention and
investment that we have put into this sector through this budget, we expect this to lead to the creation of significant employment opportunities. In that vein, Mr. Deputy Speaker, most persons are familiar with the Commonwealth Caribbean Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme, commonly referred to as the farm programme. This programme involves the temporary employment of Trinidad and Tobago nationals on Canadian farms from January 1st to December 15th, annually. Close to 1,000 persons participated or participate in the farm programme each year. These persons not only receive their monetary income with which they support themselves and their families but they also gain invaluable skills and knowledge of agricultural techniques that can be used to generate income when they return.

Over the period January to March 2020, 63 nationals went on to Ontario and 35 went to Alberta. With the emergence of COVID-19 and subsequent international border closures, there was a delay in the departure of the next two cohorts of workers. However, following the implementation of a new protocol for seasonal workers, three more groups totalling 391 nationals were able to travel between June and August 2020. We look forward to getting this programme back in full swing when the worldwide COVID-19 threat has been reduced.

In fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I mentioned, given the significant focus that will be placed on the agricultural sector, I foresee an avenue whereby these persons who have participated in the farm programme can invest their earnings and expertise to create sustainable agriculture—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have two more minutes.

Hon. S. Mc Clashie:—enterprises in Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, also aligned to the Ministry of Labour is the national employment service which

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take résumés, look at them and match them to employment opportunities within Trinidad and Tobago. Since 2015 we have had 14,000 people registered on this programme, we have interviewed almost the same amount and we have been able to place 4,368 persons in employment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, at the end of the day, the labour market and the labour climate in Trinidad and Tobago will all be dependent on how we as a nation, labour, employees and employee representative bodies and the Government, how we come together. I hope and expect that as we move the legislation forward, that we will have the support of the Opposition in doing so, and that we can work to maintain another five years of industrial peace in Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, I would like to thank you for your maiden speech in this august Chamber. I congratulate you. [Desk thumping] I will also recognize now the Member for Diego Martin—[Crosstalk] Okay, at this time, I will recognize the hon. Member for Couva South. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (Couva South): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I take this opportunity to join this debate on sixth budget presentation of the Government of Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley. And immediately, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to take the opportunity to commend the Leader of the Opposition for a very thorough and incisive contribution [Desk thumping] which was a timely reminder to Trinidad and Tobago that the United National Congress is the only viable option for the future of this country. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to take the opportunity also to congratulate all my colleagues on this side who have spoken and have made their respective contributions, especially those who have made their maiden contributions, and
also, on the opposite side of the House and commend them and look to their continued input in future debates in this Parliament.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when a budget is presented to a country, it is supposed to inspire hope, confidence, stability, realized economic growth, indicate a road way or a pathway for attracting foreign direct investment and create hope, as I said, for job opportunities and creation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, unfortunately, the last five budget presentations of the Government of Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley has not pointed in this direction, and the sixth one will realize nothing. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the truth is, the reality on the ground is, the people of this country is hurting, the people of this country feel disconnected as it relates to improving their quality of life and standard of living, and we will not realize any job creation and economic growth, and the overall 266 persons who are living under the poverty line will be pushed further under the poverty line within next fiscal year. [Desk thumping]

And no matter how much public relations propaganda and tag lines that they want to engage in and tell you that they could see clearly now, and I did it my way, and there was turnaround in the economy of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, resetting the economy for growth and innovation will lead to further pressure on the workers of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping] The order of the day will be unemployment, underemployment, more job losses, and we can go on and on about the betrayal and unrelenting job losses and brutalization that the labour movement has had to suffer and incur over the last five years.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to, before I go on, I want to deal with some of the inputs which have been made by previous speakers on the opposite side and
most importantly, I want to focus on, in just passing, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, the Minister of Public Utilities told this House that elections do have consequences. And I want to tell him yes, they have consequences because it will mean five more years of incompetence, five more years of job losses, and five more years of pressure on the poor and the vulnerable. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the MP for Port of Spain South said and he indicated that he wanted to make and recommend for mandatory reading the manifesto of the People’s National Movement for 2020 and he pointed as it relates to five or I think eight areas of development that would have realized a change in the fortunes of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker,

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if the Member of Parliament for Port of Spain South read the manifesto of the PNM for 2015, he would have realized not one manifesto promise of the PNM from 2015 prior to the general elections of 2015 was implemented between 2015 to 2020, so how can we expect anything from the 2020 manifesto [Desk thumping] to be implemented between 2020 to 2025, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

And I thought, well, we would have had a change a fortunes at the Ministry of Labour, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but having listened to the Minister of Labour—[Interruption]—I will not reach there but having listened to the Minister of Labour, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister Labour went on and he gave a global appreciation of what is transpiring in terms of the pandemic and the world of work and the unemployment statistics and so forth. All that is good, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and he spoke about broadening the social safety net and the social programmes of the Government reaching out to the poor and the vulnerable.

Well, I want to tell the Minister of Labour, Minister, Member for La Brea,
the constituents of Couva South are still looking for their salary relief grant, they are still looking for their unemployment relief grant, they are still looking for their rental accommodation grant and they are still looking for their self-employed grant, so you can point me, and any other speaker on that side, to point me [Desk thumping] where and how the vulnerable groups in, for example, the constituency of Couva South are benefiting from these programmes and these grants. Because the Minister of Social Development and Family Services regaled us with a series of statistics and so on, and I notice that a trend is emerging in this particular debate where Members on the Government side continue to boast about what is being done in their constituency.

The Member for St. Joseph, when he spoke, he outlined that he rolled off a series of achievements. I think the Minister of Education, the Member of Parliament for St. Ann’s East also rolled out a series of infrastructural work and development that was being done in her constituency, and so on. All that is fine for the people of those who belong to the ruling party but the way that we are reading it on this side is that the benefits are not trickling down because it is symptomatic of the discrimination and the way that the PNM practices its politics of distributing in terms of meeting [Desk thumping] the needs of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That is the reality, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that is why I will tell you, on this side, in the 19 constituencies of the Opposition, it is sheer frustration, it is sheer pressure and the government policies in terms of the way it is being rolled out is totally disconnected and not trickling down [Desk thumping] and benefiting those individuals who reside in the 19 constituencies under the control of the Opposition.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, and then the Minister of Labour went on to say that he
was building on the work of his predecessor, and he was honouring the legacy of his predecessor. Mr. Minister, if you really had—and I do not want to use the word really, eh. I really do not want to use the word because you have made your first contribution in this House but you really seem to be “brass-face” this evening to tell us that you are honouring the legacy and the work of your predecessor. There was nothing that was done by your predecessor, Mr. Deputy Speaker, [Desk thumping] nothing. If indeed she had anything of achievement to report, Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley probably would have had her back in the Cabinet. [Desk thumping] So I want you to understand that, Mr. Minister of Labour.

And, Mr. Minister of Labour, you spoke about pandemic leave. Workers in Trinidad and Tobago, whether in the private sector or the public sector, know nothing in terms of what was pronounced upon by your predecessor and in fact, your Prime Minister in this very House said that he knew nothing about pandemic leave and in terms of what it means for workers to benefit. And I am sure you should have told us how many labour disputes are before the Ministry of Labour as it relates to the whole question of who took pandemic leave when it had no formal approval from the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago; was not a policy that could be honoured by the employers in the private sector or the public sector. I thought that that would have told us [Desk thumping] very clearly about the legacy of your predecessor.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, then the Minister of Labour, taking his first guard at the crease, naturally wanted to “show up” all the good on the part of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and he went to speak boldly and in this very brave way to say that the personal income tax allowance which will see now workers or persons who are employed, who are earning 7,000 or less, will no
longer pay income tax and it will contribute or it will lead to a $750 million stimulus into economy of this country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, and Mr. Minister of Labour, in reality, the Government has carried out a con job on the workers and on the population of this country. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is in keeping with the narrative of deception and “conmanship” and not telling the truth [Desk thumping] because at the end of the day, this benefit which will come into workers’ pockets, approximately $300 per month, will be taken away with the imposition of the property tax. And up until now, we do not know, this property tax we have been hearing it budget after budget, all the Minister of Finance has told us is that the property tax will be applied in a very fair and transparent manner and in an equitable manner. Up until now, nobody on that side could have stood up in this debate and indicate to the national community what will be a potential sum that a person will have to pay. What will be the cost in terms of his or her pocket, and so on. And this is why I am saying to you that this is nothing to boast about because it is giving with the left hand and taking with the right hand, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [Desk thumping] So we do not know if a person will have to pay $300 per month extra in terms of property tax, $500, $1,000, and so on. And even, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition to the property tax when it is rolled out from a residential property, when the imposition is placed on commercial properties and so on, how the cost of production will be passed on to the consumers and workers in this country.

In addition too, we have heard that there will be an increase in water rates, there will an increase in electricity rates, and so on, and this is the consequence Minister of Public Utilities of elections in Trinidad and Tobago. And that is why when he we said that there are consequences to an election, I want the country to
And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, then the Minister of Labour went on to speak about the role of the Occupational Safety and Health Agency and what it is was doing in light of the existing pandemic, and so on, and we may want to give him a bit of credit as it relates to the whole question of the workplace policy and guideline policy and so on. But Mr. Minister of Labour, I want to ask you, and you should have told us what will be the role of the Occupational Safety and Health Agency beyond the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of how we will continue to function in the virtual workplace and in the real workplace? [Desk thumping] Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Labour should have told us whether the Government is considering mandatory sanitization protocols in the workplace just as they have facilitated making the wearing of mask mandatory by legislating it in this very said Parliament.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to ask the Minister of Labour, what is the true state of affairs at the Occupational Safety and Health Agency? What are the qualifications of the existing director of the Occupational Safety and Health Agency? And is that person really fitting the bill based on the existing qualification that the director has— the substantive director has, and whether that person was related in any form and fashion to a former Minister and had any relationship with your predecessor, Mr. Minister of Labour?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also want to know, in terms of OSHA, how many vacant positions are existing at OSHA? How many persons are in acting positions and what will be done to normalize their tenure based on the fact, and I will say much more on this, based on the fact that your Prime Minister has stated that all
vacancies in the public—and he said in the public sector, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in terms of what was pronounced by the Minister of Finance, and what was elucidated on by the Prime Minister?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Labour said that the Ministry was engaged in a programme of reviewing labour legislation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not know if the Minister of Labour got a proper handover from his predecessor because he said was honouring the work and honouring the legacy of his predecessor. I want to tell the Minister of Labour that we have read, and I do not know if all the speakers on your side and especially Port of Spain South boasted about making the manifesto mandatory. Mr. Deputy Speaker, and Minister of Labour, your manifesto of 2015 said and I want to quote:

“A comprehensive and immediate review, in consultation with the Trade Union Movement, of all Labour Legislation, such as the Industrial Relations Act, Retrenchment &…”—severance—“…Benefits Act.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we were told, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when the management of ArcelorMittal was looking for the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development to discuss the impending closure of ArcelorMittal and Centrin and so on, we were told when Centrin and ArcelorMittal shut their doors, we were told by the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development because she journeyed to the constituency of Couva South. I could remember a Saturday morning somewhere in the precincts of headquarters of the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union—not Seamen and—the steelworkers hall in California, she went down there and she told the 700-plus ArcelorMittal workers and the Centrin workers that there will be an immediate review of all labour legislation especially the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act to cater for
creating a softer landing for retrenched workers in Trinidad and Tobago. That was in 2016, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And then she went even further, she promised a 10-point plan, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the formation of a national employment registry, and she was all over Trinidad and Tobago boasting, again, deceiving, not speaking the truth. That is the track record [Desk thumping] of the PNM and I want to tell the workers of Trinidad and Tobago, I want to tell the labour movement, I want to tell the workers in the informal economy of this country, I to tell all who voted for the PNM also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that 100,000 workers between 2015 and 2020 have lost their jobs.

And we must understand, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic or the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 63,633 persons lost their jobs because of the incompetence, the lack of a clear direction for job creation and job opportunities in this country, and they wrecked the economy of this country, [Desk thumping] that is why there was this massive amount of job losses prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. And more importantly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the promise was to review the labour legislation and the promise of this 10-point plan.

Five years have come and gone, that has not become a reality, and I want to tell Trinidad and Tobago, if you wait on the PNM to deliver labour legislation and reform, it will not come because this Government has emerged to be the most anti-worker, anti-union, anti-people Government in the history of Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping]

And I make this pronouncement, not out of malice and out of spite and wanting to talk, but we have to understand that how the PNM treats the labour
movement, how the PNM treats workers in this country, you have to examine their track record from the Industrial Stabilisation Act, right up until 2020, and in between there, there are a series of examples where they have unleashed the police, the army, they have terrorized workers in all forms and fashion, and that is why I am saying to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to Trinidad and Tobago, we will not get any form of labour legislation in the country under the PNM. \[\text{Desk thumping}\]

And then he boasted—you see, I came with a prepared text, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but based on what the Minister of Labour said in his contribution, I have to debunk and I have to tell Trinidad and Tobago the truth, that is why I have to throw away this speech, Mr. Deputy Speaker. \[\text{Desk thumping}\]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, he boasted about the PNM increasing the minimum wage and so on. I want to remind Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because these are the things that we must never, never, never forget, when they boasted about increasing the national minimum wage.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we must never forget that they increased gasoline and the price of gasoline and diesel three times between 2015 and 2020. They imposed a 7 per cent online tax; they restored VAT, 12.5 per cent VAT on 7,000 basic food items, \[\text{Desk thumping}\] food items purchased by the poor and the vulnerable, people who exist on a minimum wage in this country and then they come to boast about they increased the minimum wage between 2015 and 2020; hogwash, Mr. Deputy Speaker. At the end of the day, there are 266—

\textbf{8.00 p.m.}

\textbf{Mr. Deputy Speaker:} Member, use a different word please. Retract that word and use a different word please.

\textbf{Mr. R. Indarsingh:} Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am guided, but I sometimes say it how
I see it and—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** All I did is ask you to retract the word. That is all I did.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** I am guided, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** No, you have to retract the word.

**Mr. R. Indarsingh:** I retract, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The point I was making, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that the deception of the PNM continues to plague us in Trinidad and Tobago. [Desk thumping] And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, one other issue, before I go into dealing with some of the issues that were presented in the budget presentation. He pointed in the direction of a draft sexual harassment policy that was laid—a draft sexual harassment policy for the workplace that was laid by his former predecessor. All well and good, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We on this side want to deal with this issue in a very decisive manner, and we do not want it to only be dealt with in the workplace but we want it to pervade the education of our young ones and so on, so that we could play our respective roles in eliminating sexual harassment and so on in the workplace.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, the hypocrisy of those on the other side is that they will not tell us what has happened to the sexual harassment report, that the Prime Minister appointed a three-person committee, headed by a former Permanent Secretary in the name of Jackie Wilson, and when he appointed persons to that committee in—Folade Mutota and attorney-at-law Elaine Greene. And if those on the other side had any decency, because it had to do with the sexual harassment, or the alleged sexual harassment of a female, a woman in our society, and if they had any decency on that side, they would have ensured that that report
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Mr. Indarsingh (cont’d)

on what transpired [Desk thumping] at the Ministry of Sport would have been laid, would have been made public, and it would have offered a sense of comfort and support to someone who was aggrieved in her workplace, and could have played a role in eliminating further instances, and problems, and infringement of sexual harassment in the workplace.

So we must not speak with forked tongues, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We must speak with commitment, [Desk thumping] real commitment in the furtherance of the dignity of women, not only in the workplace, but throughout Trinidad and Tobago, and they must not hide that report. They must not hide it under the guise of the Attorney General is sanitizing that report from a legal point of view, but I call upon the Prime Minister and his entire Cabinet, that if you are serious about dealing with women’s issues and sexual harassment in the workplace, make that report public [Desk thumping] so that we could all benefit from that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the United National Congress has always been a party that has had a very strong ideological base and philosophy as it relates to workers being the centre of what we would call in relation to building a productive nation and a productive Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And when I was compiling my research as it relates to this particular debate, I was taken aback, you know, because in doing my research, I read a newspaper article: We will protect the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Prime Minister Rowley fuels supply promise. Mr. Deputy Speaker, where has been the protection for the over 100,000 workers who have had lost their jobs in this country? Where has the protection come from for the over 2,000 families who have lost their loved ones through the murders and so on that have occurred in Trinidad and Tobago? And I
could go on and on as it relates to the incompetence of this Government, as it relates to protecting the workers and the labour movement of this country. But more importantly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I see my friend, the Member for Port of Spain South is back in the Chamber at this point in time, and he pointed us in the direction of the manifesto of the PNM, and I want to ask him, where in the manifesto did it speak about the privatization of the port? [Desk thumping] Because there are a numbers of unanswered questions that must been raised or should be raised in relation to their failure to give the information that is most needed at this point in time. Because the President General of the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union has pointed out that the restructuring of the port has implications for at least 1,500 job loses, and certainly this was not written in the PNM’s manifesto.

And today I want to ask the Minister of Finance, in his winding up, or if he will bring the much touted Minister of Works and Transport to tell us what will be the business model as it relates to the new entity that they are configuring, or they have configured, as it relates to the Port of Port of Spain. And the Leader of the Opposition has already pronounced in her contribution, the contradiction. You want to restructure the Port of Port of Spain, you want to privatize the Port of Port of Spain, but you are building one in Toco. You are not telling us how much money you are spending down in Toco, but you are not telling us too how much the restructuring of the port or what business model you would use, how much savings it would lead to in relation to the Treasury of Trinidad and Tobago? [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I ask the Minister of Finance, because we all want, as stakeholders, we all want, as citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, greater efficiency in
the any government entity. This is what we all achieve to, want to achieve, or we strive for as citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the PNM has not told us, as it relates to, what was their position when the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union attempted to engage the Minister of Works and Transport, and also, the commissioners at the Port Authority as it relates to dealing with the question of the cost of labour at the port? Because the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union, they signed a collective agreement sometime in 2015, and this particular collective agreement spoke to realizing international best practices, reduction in gang sizes, and making the port work 24/7 which would have realized making Saturday and Sunday work on the port what we would call normal working days and would not have attracted what we would call premium rates. And what was the Government’s position as it relates to when the said union told the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and also, the commissioners at the port that they wanted to—they would support sending home approximately 675 workers to save the state enterprise from going belly-up in September of 2018? Did the Government of the day, did the Minister of Transport embrace the recommendation of the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union?

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to ask the Minister of Finance or the Minister of Works and Transport, if he is brave enough to join this particular debate, whether the Government has already made up its mind in terms of the business model, and who will be the business partner as it relates to the Port of Port of Spain? [Desk thumping] I am getting news in the grapevine that a Chinese entity by the name of Orient Overseas Container Line, commonly known as OOCL, a container shipping and logistics service company, with a track record of being involved in over 70 countries from a global perspective that is based in Hong
Kong, they have their eyes on the ports, and there are probably those in the Government who are facilitating their entry. And also a French entity based in Marseille, in France, by the name of—I am trying to get the acronym, CCGM. It is a company that has an office in Furnace House in Port of Spain, so I am told, that that company, that French company also has its sights on becoming a partner at the Port of Port of Spain, and whether it is a done deal, and it is total disrespect on the part of the Government by coming and pronouncing in this particular budget presentation, without seeing the decent thing to do in embracing the recognized majority union, the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union. But then again, what could I expect of the PNM based on their track record between 2015 and 2020?

And I want to warn the workers, and I want to warn the labour movement, whether it is T&TEC, whether it is WASA, based on the Government’s track record as it relates to the restructuring of Petrotrin and whatever Cabinet-appointed reports, subcommittee reports and so on, we must never forget at Petrotrin, none of the consultants recommended the closure of the Petrotrin refinery. They recommended a restructuring. [Desk thumping] They recommended a restructuring committee with union representatives and an 18-month road map. And in the height of that, when a memorandum of understanding was signed between the union and the company at Petrotrin in relation to its restructuring, the Government undermined the basic tenet of good industrial relations practices, went to the workers, undermined the agreement and took the blanket decision to close the Petrotrin refinery. [Desk thumping]

So again, my warning to the labour movement is that there will be no respite from the way the PNM approaches good industrial relations practices in Trinidad...
and Tobago. There will be an undermining of the process and that is why I am warning the labour movement, do not play with the People’s National Movement as it relates to the future of workers in this country and their pension plan benefits, their group plan benefits and their families’ benefits in terms of their stability and well-being. And then, all of a sudden, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in recent times, the public service has emerged to be the whipping boy of the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. And his Minister of Finance announced in budget presentation that there will be freezing of all vacancies in the public sector, without clarifying whether it would be confined only to the public service, whether it would incorporate the teaching service, the police—not the police service but the fire service, the prison service, and so on, and all frontline medical workers who are battling this pandemic at this time, because they all fall under the wide purview of public sector workers in Trinidad and Tobago. Maybe the Prime Minister has emerged even more arrogant and more anti-worker because he has a new mandate, so he does not care about the workers, he does not care about the labour movement, he does not care about any joint memorandum of understanding. So he is bulldozing, he will bully, he will “buff up”, he will tell you what you want because he is in charge based on the way that they have operated in the last five years, and how they will operate in the forthcoming five years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I make these pronouncement as it relates to the public service because, as I said, we need clarification. But importantly too, all of a sudden, the Prime Minister, after seven months into the pandemic, now realizes that there is absenteeism and indiscipline and so on, as it relates to the rotation of workers in the public service and how they are reporting for work. Is the Prime Minister attacking the head of the public service? Is the Prime Minister attacking
all Permanent Secretaries and heads of Department? The Prime Minister must not
c broad brush all public servants in this country. [Desk thumping] And if the Prime
Minister had any decency and any right approach in the management of what he
wanted to realize from the productivity and efficiency of public sector workers, as
it relates to this pandemic and reporting for duty and ensuring there are not long
lines and chaos in terms of public departments and the services, that the citizens
realized the Prime Minister would have ensured that there was buy-in from the
head of the public service, there was buy-in from the heads of Departments,
Permanent Secretaries, and most importantly, the recognized majority union in the
field of the public service.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, you have two more minutes.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And also, I want to focus
very quickly on the issue of the National Insurance System. The Minister of
Finance announced that there will been an increase in the retirement age, and in his
usual deceptive style, “playing dead to ketch corbeau alive”, the Minister of
Finance did not tell the workers of this country, the labour movement and the
business community, that he is in possession of the Tenth Actuarial Review of the
National Insurance System, which has recommended not only an increase in the
retirement age up to 65, it has also said that if you access your pension at 64, 62—
between 64 to 60, you will lose 6 per cent of your entitlement on an annual basis if
you take or exercise the option of an early retirement. The Ministry of Finance and
the Government of Trinidad and Tobago must tell us what are their views and
whether they have embraced the recommendations of the Tenth Actuarial
Evaluation Report of the National Insurance System, [Desk thumping] and not hide
behind of making a broad pronouncement that we want to increase your retirement
Mr. Deputy Speaker, time is against me as it relates to a number of constituencies issues. But based on the track record of this PNM Government, no roads, no schools, no health issues, nothing will be addressed in the constituency or improve in the constituency of Couva South, because it has not been addressed in the last five years. So, I expect nothing different in this administration because they will continue their policies of discrimination and treating the Opposition constituencies as second-class citizens in Trinidad and Tobago. And as I wind up, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to tell the labour movement and the workers of this country, do not play with the People’s National Movement. I thank you. [Desk thumping]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I would like to recognize the hon. Member for Diego Martin Central.

**The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Symon De Nobriga):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Thank you for the opportunity to join this debate today as we continue to discuss the financial appropriation Bill, 2021. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is fortuitous that I make this my maiden contribution to the House during a budget debate when for all intents and purposes, I am obligated to report on the work of the Ministry I inherited, to provide some insights into the Government’s ongoing plans with the portfolio of communications, and report on my position as the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin Central.

It would be remiss of me, therefore, if I did not offer my sincerest gratitude to the hon. Prime Minister and leader of this team with the confidence he has placed in me, firstly, to represent the interest of the people of Diego Martin Central, and secondly, by allowing me to serve in this capacity. I am equally
indebted not only to my constituents for entrusting me with their right to representation but also, to all the previous Diego Martin Central MPs in whose footsteps I now proudly walk, and I give this honourable House and them the assurance today that I would do all within my own power to more than justify the confidence so overwhelmingly reposed in me. [Desk thumping]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is against the backdrop of those responsibilities that I make my contribution today, and I start by thanking the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Planning and Development for so expertly crafting the budget that we are here to debate. PNM’s Vision 2030 document as a guide, along with our 2020 manifesto, both speak to the empowerment and facilitation of communities as an integral building block for the advancement of this country and co-creation of a new society, and it is that investment in people and communities that has led to this budget and to the policy decisions that would redound to the benefit of those small and micro businesses that make up so much of the local economy in Diego Martin Central. And I can happily report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that in my conversations with my constituents, that the overall response has been one of support with the decisions taken and joy for the opportunity to regain some of the ground lost as a result of the economic fallout associated with the COVID-19 pandemic; fallout that would have been infinitely more far-reaching and destructive to those microeconomies that form the connecting tissue that move the business of Diego Martin Central, were it not for the timely intervention of the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance and their astute supporting team. [MADAM SPEAKER in the Chair]

Let me at this time, Madam Speaker, offer my sincere condolences to the families and loved ones, to those affected by this virus, that has turned the world
on its head and made a path of destruction through so many of its economies. Madam Speaker, of the many decisions taken in this budget, I want to offer the thanks of a grateful Diego Martin Central for a few in particular. They are, the increase in the personal tax allowance, the availability of student broadband, the removal of taxes on technological hardware and software, the Government’s continued support of small businesses and especially, tech start-ups in the waiver of stamp duty for first-time homeowners, and I will expand on these further. But in addition to those, Madam Speaker, just last week I was honoured to join the Prime Minister and the Minister of Health at the official opening of the brand new Diego Martin health facility. This state-of-the-art facility will provide an extensive array of services to the people of Diego Martin Central and the wider Diego Martin public, services that would include but are not limited to, general walk-in services, specialty clinical services inclusive of diabetic eye screening services, dental services, imaging services like ultrasound and x-ray, and allied support services such as HIV testing, dietary counselling, point-of-care testing and social welfare services.

Madam Speaker, I can also report that the old health centre will be converted to a behavioural wellness centre as part of the thrust to decentralize mental health care in this nation. I wish to thank the Minister of Health, the project manager and the contractors for having this facility completed for the use of my constituents and my neighbours before time and on budget. And whilst we here must be concerned with those factors, know that the real value is in bringing this first-class facility to fruition is in the lives it would change and the lives it would save. This Government will continue to make meaningful investments in the people of Diego Martin Central with the commencement of the Diego Martin library by UDeCOTT
for NALIS, and it is further proof of our commitment to creating spaces where our young and not so young can all participate in lifelong learning, and in the building, educating and developing of our nation through our communities.

Madam Speaker, nowhere is this more tangible than in the refurbishment of community centres and the recent extensive renovation of the Diego Martin Central Community Centre which now, among other activities, accommodates the NAMDEVCO farmers market on a Saturday morning, is no exception. And as efforts continue, both at the ministerial level and at my constituency office, I can report to my constituents that having seen the work required to restore the Cocorite Community Centre, I have engaged the Minister responsible for community development, the hon. Shamfa Cudjoe, and I am looking forward to conducting a site visit with her, and key stakeholders in the very near future, to establish a way forward for that facility.

Madam Speaker, as I mentioned, I have been entrusted with the responsibility for government communications, and I have learnt very quickly how deceptively nuisance this implementation— the implementation of this portfolio can be. The question is always going to be, how do you allow the voice of Government to be heard amidst the plethora of other voices ever present in the society? In the midst of a deregulated media industry with 36 radio stations, a multiplicity of television stations, a handful of newspapers, and numerous cable stations exist side by side, information about government’s activities initiatives, projects and plans can easily be lost. Throw in if you will, Madam Speaker, the myriad number of keyboard warriors that social media has given a voice. One can immediately envision the mind-boggling levels of information and unfortunately, sometimes, misinformation that is thrown at citizens on a daily basis, and it is in

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that clutter that the portfolio of government communications finds itself.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Tuesday the 13\textsuperscript{th} day of October at 10.00 a.m.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 8.27 p.m.*